

## **Prologue**

Bellatrix Lestrange stared at the results one more time. It was *inconceivable* – this could *not* be happening – not to *her* –

She looked up, and felt an unfamiliar feeling blossom its way into her heart. She could not, for the life of her, remember exactly what it was – but, as she looked into her husband's dark eyes, full of rage, she remembered. Faintly.

*Fear.*

Rodolphus gritted his teeth – a bad sign. She dropped the scrap of parchment onto the desk before them, the numbness seeming to swamp her like a tide of angry water, fiercely purging away all feeling.

***We regret to inform you that you are unable to bear any magical offspring.***

What did that *mean*? She was a *Black*, for Morgana's sake – she –

“Did you know about this?” The low tone of her husband's voice did nothing, *nothing* to conceal his anger. Bellatrix could only reread the scrap as it lay on the table, her brain screaming in confusion and anger. The sharp tickle of her husband's dry hand hitting her face helped to bring her to. “*Did you know?*” Rodolphus hissed.

Within her, Bella's heart seemed to shrivel. He'd *never* used that tone – not when it was not needed – what did he *think* her, a fool like her simpering twit of a sister? Of course she'd not –

“*Answer me!*” But before Bella could form the words on her leaden tongue, Rodolphus was already seizing her, throwing her against the wall.

Almost the same way he'd thrown her on the bed the night before, dark eyes gleaming with hunger and anticipation.

Almost.

She tried to shake her head. This wasn't *fair* – this was better off in the lives of Muggle-loving fools who wouldn't *care* – she was a *Black*, and she was *supposed* to bear offspring – for the Dark Lord's bidding –

Bellatrix let out the first sob that had emanated from her lips in years.

And, as Rodolphus poured out his rage, lashing out at her with his wand and his fists, she gave into it. It was only what she deserved – failing her Master –

Darkness descended in like a heavy, smothering blanket, drowning out her vague, useless pride that she, at least, had not *screamed*.

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Hours later, she woke up in the room. It was bloody, the couch she lay on – and she knew, oh, she *knew* it was all, or most, of her blood. She reached for her wand – the first time she'd done so since she'd read the damning result of the simple magical test that, even now, continued to tear at something deep inside of her.

Somehow, she *knew* it wasn't fair – wasn't fair that Narcissa had gotten her blond man and blonde son – wasn't fair that *Andromeda*, the little Muggle-loving slut, had gotten *her* own abomination of a half-blood, when *she*, she who had done everything right, she who had *upheld* the Black name, was to be forever cheated.

Bella closed her hooded eyes tiredly, running through the familiar cadences of the Healing spells. It was so odd, so – so *unreal*, somehow, realising *she'd* ended up with one of the most rare Wizarding conditions a witch could *have* – being able to bear only Squib, or, even worse, *Muggle* children.

She was no use, now, to the Dark Lord – to his *plans* –

Bella sobbed for the second time that evening, not even thinking of her husband, or his whereabouts. There was nothing for it – for her – she'd *craved* to *help*, so much, and now *Narcissa* would get the glory – the fame – the attention –

In that moment, Bellatrix hated her. Hated her for having the child that not only she and Lucius wanted – but the child that Voldemort could sanction, a child that would grow in his presence, be taught from *birth* –

Bellatrix screamed at the empty room, lashing out at the worn-down furniture with her bloody wand, because it was the only thing she could really do.

The magical drain had *certainly* not been what her tortured body had needed, and she sank back onto the couch, heaving with dry sobs, lights seeming to flash on and off behind her eyelids as she closed them, as she sobbed for breath.

The last thing she could hold on to before she drifted off into the darkness was that her life – was – not – fair –

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She woke up, this time, to Rabastan Lestrangle's odd, intense sneer. She forced herself not to sneer back, as always – the fool had always wanted her, hadn't he – always wanting everything his big brother had –

A sharp *slap* moved her into action.

"What do you think you are *doing*, Rabastan?" Bellatrix sneered as nastily as she could, not giving in to the impulse to reach for her wand and Blast him away. Hard. He was such a snivelling coward on occasion, really –

Another *slap* had her rearing up from the lumpy couch, despite her injuries, and trying to hit him back. She'd *show* him – *no one* was allowed to touch her, apart from Rodolphus –

"Taking something I should have taken a *long*, long time ago, *Bella...*" His eyes narrowed, hardening as his strong arms latched onto her.

Sharp fear filled Bella's gut for the second time that day, as Rabastan divested her of her wand. She fought him hard as he tried to throw her around the room – he wasn't *big* enough for that, thank Merlin – but he pinned her down by the door that led to the bedroom she

shared with her husband, pressing his reeking body and robes against her bloody ones, and all of a sudden she really *knew*, and the fear and disgust threatened to overwhelm her –

“*Carnatitio!*” Rabastan whispered, almost lovingly, into her ear. Bellatrix screamed as she felt the curse take hold of her major limbs, screamed in spite of the fact that she *knew* he’d enjoy it – after all, Rodolphus was the same *way* – “Rabastan – you *bastard* – ”

“Shut *up*, you rabid *bitch*,” he snarled back, unconcerned, as if she were not chained to her own bed, “I’m softening you up – you’re worth *nothing* to Rodolphus *now* – I can do whatever the bloody *fuck* I want with you, and he wouldn’t *care* – ”

“As always, you *never* think things through – you’ll always be a foolish *bastard* – bloody *coward* – if I had my *wand* – ”

“If you *had* your only snivelling excuse for witchcraft, you’d *beg* for it, Bella – shut *up*, and you may actually *enjoy* this – ”

But Bellatrix was already using her last vestiges of will to fight, already twisting so she could draw those chains, those same chains from last *night*, around his filthy, gasping neck – she needed her wand –

“Y – you – *bitch* – ” Rabastan managed to cough out. His wiry arms hit out at her – but *Merlin*, she wasn’t going to bloody let this happen, let him *condescend* to *touch* her as if she wasn’t his brother’s – his eyes bugged out as he choked for air, and Bella began to think that he might actually *expire* –

She grudgingly tried to loosen the grip of her chained arms around his neck, but the chains locked, and he thrashed, hard, against her – it was slightly sickening –

*Thank Morgana he’s limp now –*

She only just managed to untangle herself before passing out again.

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Bellatrix's dark eyes slit open cautiously – she felt weak, stretched, *painful* –

“My lord,” a very familiar voice sneered nearby. “She awakens...” The voice was so cold, so underlain with *malice* that Bella hesitated to speak. Trying to sit up – it was *Rodolphus*, *her* Rodolphus, speaking as if he couldn't care if she died in his arms – she felt the bite of chains on her wrists, *again*. But this time they flared with some kind of magical fire, making Bella, inured to pain as all of the Inner Circle, wince in dreaded anticipation.

Now the suffering would *really* begin – she was in the torture chains, she *knew* it –

“Rodolphus...” she managed to get out, as more of a sputtered wheeze than an actual word.

“*Be quiet!*” her husband's voice snarled at her. “How *could* you, Bella?” His voice came closer – frighteningly so, in this state –

Bella couldn't understand, could simply not comprehend what on earth would have *caused* –

Before she could speculate, a Cruciatus curse hit her out of the blue, causing her to spasm in what was partly surprise and partly pain. She did not grit her teeth – they could *fracture*, in a Cruciatus of this intensity – and she tried not to move her wrists and arms too much, to lessen the pain of the heated chains, but it seemed all in vain, as her body quivered and spasmed violently with the searing pain of the Cruciatus and the localised throb of the burning chains. A murmur of voices seemed to assault her, some jaunty, which she'd expected. She was not as popular within the Inner Circle as she would like – many of the men were disdainful of her ability as a woman, and would be greatly glad to see her demise tonight.

If it was night, at all. For, as the curse finally ceased, she could barely see.

Her throat worked, but all that seemed to come out of her mouth was blood, as she'd bitten her tongue at some point.

“...you, you who I *cherished*,” Rodolphus was sputtering out. “You *killed* him – you useless *whore* – ” Bella flinched at a heavy hand came down, choking her, not because of the pain, but because he was *calling* her –

So his brother was dead. Bella’s thoughts raced wildly – there was nothing, *nothing* she could do now – especially as she was near useless now –

“Rodolphus, *enough!*”

The cold, charismatic voice, coming from far away, did nothing to restore Bellatrix’s wounded, bleeding confidence. That was the voice of her Lord – and she let her head slacken and fall, because she *knew*, she had failed him – how he would punish her –

And, indeed, he did.

Just not the way she’d expected. The Dark Lord had come upon her, prying her sore eyes open with some spell, practically *hissing* at her. The words he’d used – *defiled*, *useless* – could only mean one fate.

Death. It was her fault, he explained tightly, for depriving him of a faithful follower, a member of the Inner Circle like herself, and someone had kicked her when she had tried to explain out of turn, and her side seemed to be *alive* with fire.

Bella knew she should be grateful, *knew* she should be thankful that he had not let her enraged husband wreak his vengeance for his beloved brother’s death, but part of her kept asking why, *why* she should be marginalised, treated as thus, when the filthy bastard had tried to touch her.

She had tried to explain again, to explain, haltingly, around the pain, that she had only wanted to keep herself pure – for her husband, who she begged now – but a kick in the ribs and a Cruciatus shut her up. And the Dark Lord explained, over the laughter – she could actually *hear* it – that she was as useless to him, now, as a Squib. He needed *fertile* women – and since *Bella* was not, she was hitherto unnecessary in his plans to defeat the vile prophecy that had sprung up and panicked them all.

And then another Cruciatus was blasted at her, for her punishment, again and again and *again*, and darkness crept in.

It was only slightly better that way, she knew, even as her eyes closed of their own accord. The way their Lord was talking of her...as if she was something to be...discarded...

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A tired, filthy Severus Snape stared down at the twisted, shrivelled remnants of the woman before him, wondering what to do.

The Dark Lord had become even *more* erratic over the last few days, and that explained this heavy loss, this purposeful destruction of such a resource.

Severus grimaced. It was folly in the extreme, just another example of his Lord's unease, just another example of his incapacity to add to the overgrown stock in Severus' keen memory. He bent closer, examining her impartially – she did not seem to be breathing, and her face and limbs were rapidly losing colour. She was almost certainly dead, or would very swiftly be so.

Severus deliberated with himself uneasily. It was one thing to shun the most foolish, inhumane acts of what he'd increasingly begun to regard as the madman who commanded his fealty, but quite another – *quite another* entirely, to purposefully disregard one of his express commands. The Dark Lord had told him emphatically to finish the woman off, but, faced with the task, Severus found himself hesitating.

He looked again at Bellatrix's twisted body, feeling a sort of grim satisfaction surge up in him. He sneered, watching silently as the wind on the deserted moor played with her robes – now rags, of course. She'd always been pompous, grating – not a little fanatical, and one of those he'd mistrusted on principle.

He felt a strong urge to scratch away at his itching ear and brain. Why, *why* had the Dark Lord decided she was unworthy? In *his* opinion, a Bellatrix Lestrange without children would have been all the more loyal, all the more invested in the cause, because without their Lord's approval, she would have been easily destroyed.

Just like now.

It boggled the mind, just as many of the Dark Lord's actions increasingly tended to do. It was no mistake a thinking, *lucid* Slytherin would make. Severus sighed inwardly, the familiar apprehension strengthening its hold on him. Gone was the sly, calculating master of strategy, these days, replaced by someone who became more brittle, more – *inhuman* – each passing moment. The foolish sense of godlike strength had grown, along with the Wizarding World's terror, and Severus, on delivering the garbled, chilling Prophecy to his Lord, had really begun to believe it would be the man's downfall. The problem, he repeated carefully to himself, as had become normal, was how to – ah – *extricate* himself from the mindless chaos. It sickened him even further, now, when he was in a position to see the inner workings of their Lord's mind, sickened and worried him to know that they were, essentially, fighting for nothing.

Severus corrected himself with a grim smirk. *Not for nothing – just for the whim of a madman who dreams he can rule the world...*

And that was the most irritating, and, as with all things involving the Dark Lord, *fearful* thing. What Slytherin allowed himself to fall into such delusions? *Power* was different from overlord-ship, and the latter was easy enough to attain if you had a taste for politics, like Lucius. To obtain it *blatantly* – to push the broken, fragmented Ministry into an emergency state – that meant deaths. And not of deaths of the ordinary, foolish people who moved too slow and didn't think in terms of pain and escape, oh *no*.

*Deaths*, Severus shivered, *of his followers...*

And if there was one thing that galled him, it was the idea that he would have no control over his death. Some might observe that he *deserved* it, but *Merlin*, he didn't want to *die*. Not now, not when he had hardly a dream left for himself, not when he could not even imagine what it would be like, living *constantly* under the thumb of that – of that –

Severus shook his head – he had no *time* for such foolish observations, if he wanted to disobey his Lord so blatantly – he had to move quickly, decisively –



He snorted. Something the Dark Lord left frequently, now, to the members of the Inner Circle, choosing to brood over his plans to raise up an heir, if he could not get at his two unknowing future destroyers.

Casting an Obscurus Charm on himself and on the corpse of Bellatrix, he simply Apparated to the nearby town of Sherringham, and dumped her body in the graveyard they normally used, careful to obliterate her Mark – one thing his mad Lord had asked that he *would* do.

It was the least he could do – or so Severus was starting to think. If she died, the Obscurus Charm would dissipate, and some Muggle fool would bury her. It felt more – more *right*, somehow, to the weary young man.

Severus snorted as he backed away from the body. *More* right, *indeed* – he was going *soft*.

Unknown to him, he had just changed the fate of the Wizarding world. A change which, years later, a young, hateful little boy would be extremely grateful for.

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*A/N: So, guys – what do you think? I'm pleased-ish with the story – will change and edit it some more before posting it as part of the challenge, of course.*

## **Chapter 1: An Odd Afternoon**

“*Help!* Help me – ”

Antares winced, freezing in the act of slipping into the shadows near Borgin and Burkes. *Sometimes*, he thought, disgustedly, *my luck is really horrible* –

“*Hel* – urk!”

Antares looked longingly at the dusty little book Burgin had just placed, conveniently, in an out-of-the-way corner of the nearest display window. But then, there were those cries again – of some hapless kid, wrestling with a large, mean-looking beggar Antares had avoided on instinct on entering Knockturn Alley today. The boy was fairly dark-skinned, skinny, and looked rather like he would – Antares rolled his eyes in disgust – *cry*.

*Another fool on a dare*, he muttered irritably to himself as he switched directions, slipping through the sparse, disinterested crowd as quickly as he could. There were always, from time to time, soft little kids that thought they’d be *cool* and venture into *scary Knockturn Alley* on their own.

They never got very far, of course. They’d either come to their senses and back out of the disreputable, dangerous street, or have an unfortunate incident.

Which was what *this* fool’s situation looked like becoming.

“Think yeh can steal me gold, eh?” The beggar growled, dragging the foolish boy towards one of the dark little alleyways near the usual group of beggars, who, as they were wont to do, were cheering him lustily on.

“Skin ‘is *face*, Ming – ” one yelled into Antares’ ear, making him wince.

So *this* was the Ming all the beggars talked of – insulted, deferred to – Antares sneered outwardly, his heart squeezing slightly. The beggars liked him, which was unceasingly lucky, as they tended to

harass any suspicious person following him or his mother into the Alley. But standing up to their leader, great brute that he was, would be an entirely different matter.

Antares gulped, finally in reach of the dark-skinned twit. *This*, he told himself, *will take some – ah – delicacy*. Antares almost grinned at the last word. *Not that I have much, but...*

Ming hit the now-blubbering dark kid hard, in the head. Antares blinked – that was *blood*, there – bloody strong, that chap – there'd be no *time* for delicacy if the beggar went on like that –

Which he did, half-throwing, half-shoving the boy into a nearby shop window, hard enough that the magically reinforced glass shuddered.

Antares squared his shoulders. It was time to do something –

“Oy, Ming – let him go!”

Ming turned on Antares, quicker than he was used to, but Antares was in no mood to explain himself. This was looking increasingly like a save-first-talk-later issue.

Even if he didn't *like* the idea.

So he kicked the large, bristling beggar in the shins, *hard*, grabbing hold of the now-sobbing dark boy and trying to yank him from Ming's strong grip. The beggars around him laughed and cheered as Ming stumbled and let go, but Antares knew very well that their support for him would disappear fast as a criminal with an Invisibility Cloak if he didn't act, and act *now*.

Said act, of course, involved a scream of “*Run, you idiot!*” and the slap-slap of the hasty feet of two frightened boys, one sobbing as he followed the other, who was dodging the slightly interested bystanders like a pro.

“Coom back ‘ere, Black – yeh snivelling piece o’ dragon dung – I’ll *skin* ye –”

“Keep *moving*, you idiot!” Antares snarled at his all-too-willing companion, who was stumbling pathetically against the rough flagstones as they ducked down a dank Antares knew and used on occasion. “I’ll *leave* you, I swear it – ”

“*I’m trying* – ” the boy gasped back. Antares, spotting the exit – which came out, rather fortuitously, on the other side of Borgin and Burkes, darted through it, entering the store briefly to snatch up the book to the sound of “*Oy – you, get –* ” while the shaking, snivelling dark boy crouched at the exit.

*Thank Morgana – no beggars* here – “Coast is clear – let’s go – ” But Dark Boy’s eyes were widening with even *more* fear, and he was following Antares hesitantly, despite the threat of the as-yet empty threshold of Borgin’s behind them.

“Where are you taking me?” Antares rolled his eyes, shifting the book into his robes, out of sight. The boy was clearly addled in the head –

“Somewhere where *Ming* won’t scrape your face to bits, you *idiot*. We’re going to Diagon Alley – where else?” He moved as quickly as possible, ignoring the dubious look Olive Boy gave him. *Best get out of here now – Mum’ll be looking for me –*

And, at the junction where Knockturn Alley begun, Bella was really and truly looking. Waiting. For him. She spotted Antares quickly, as usual, her eyes narrowing dangerously. Antares’ heart sunk down to somewhere in the region of his stomach, tightening into a knot the way it did when his mother, Bella, got that *look* on her face.

The ‘*I would kill you if you were not my son*’ look, to be exact. Antares paused for a minute uncertainly, prompting a confused, frightened look from Dark Boy.

“What are we *waiting* for – ”

“Hey! Hey *you!*”

Antares moved, indecision draining from him as he stepped onto the lighter, friendlier stones of Diagon Alley. The voice of Burke, the younger of the two unsavoury owners of the shop he’d just – er –

*borrowed* the book from, followed him as he dodged out into the street, making a beeline for the tall, severe form of his mother, Bellatrix Black. Dark Boy followed only as far as it took to finally realise the person his rescuer was heading for so insistently, but Antares did not blame him in the least.

His mother, he thought, rather wryly, had what he called a *thing* about her. Even as he squirmed under her angry grey eyes until she seized hold of him and a shaking Dark Boy, steering them firmly towards Magical Menagerie, he felt a spark of hot pride for her good looks, haughty bearing and – well – *thing*, which had, many times, gotten them out of scrapes and paying for things they could not entirely afford. Antares looked up at her as she pushed them roughly into the shop, full of unwilling admiration.

Unwilling, because he was *definitely* in cauldrons of trouble *this* time. Bellatrix roughly manoeuvred the boys over to a quieter area of the shop, where the lizards and poisonous mammals and reptiles were kept. Most of them, as usual, were napping, their fanged mouths lolling open, forked tongues slithering in and out slowly, sleepily. Antares relaxed a little, despite himself. He'd always felt safer at this end of the shop, where none of the silly performing rats and rabbits gambolled in gaudy cages, showing off pathetically for him.

"Perseus Antares *Black*," his mother ground out firmly. Antares looked her squarely in the eye, no matter how much those three words, words that only ever came together when Bella was angry at him, made him want to run and dodge. She would – eventually – appreciate that, she always did, when he showed no – no fear –

"Mum, I can explain," he cut in, trying to make his traitorous voice stop trembling. His mother merely tightened her grip on their arms and stared. "Ming – one of the beggars was – er – bothering – er," he glanced at the evermore frightened Dark Boy, "*what's* your name?"

"Blaise," Dark Boy got out. Bella, of course, wasn't satisfied.

"Blaise *what*, young man? Speak up, will you – your *parents* must be *beside* themselves – " she shot a pointed look at Antares, who gulped.

“Blaise Zabini,” Dark Boy – or, rather, Blaise, replied, his shaky voice a little louder this time.

“One of the beggars was roughing him up, Mum,” Antares continued, a little desperately. “I had to do *something* – ” He closed his mouth with a snap as Bella’s eyes landed on him again.

“Doing *something* had nothing to do with stealing that thing you shuffled into your robes, Antares,” she cut in, coldly.

“I didn’t – ” Antares began. Another pointed look from his mum had him changing tack. “Okay, so I *did* take something – it’s just a book, they just stuffed it in a corner in the shop, and it looked like no one *wanted* it – ”

“*Stole*,” Mum hissed at him. “The word, as I keep telling you, is *stole*.” Grey eyes met the ceiling. “Why do you do this, Tares?”

“It’s nothing *valuable*, Mum – ” Antares began, lying easily. He *had* to make her believe him – he’d never seen a book like it in the dark shop, and he’d hardly been about to leave it behind when it was small enough to fit easily in his robes –

“We are *Blacks*, Antares,” his mother spat out, twisting him closer with her iron grip, “We are *noble* – *ancient* – and we do not *steal*!”

“You’ve never had any worries about me *stealing* when we need it, have you?” he shot back, trying, unsuccessfully, to wrench his arm away from her. She always *said* this, ranting about being *noble* and *ancient* and above stealing when their luck ran low, and it galled him, because *he* did the stealing, when it needed to be done –

His mum’s face paled, her fine features pinching slightly. She shot a downward look, suddenly, at the confused Dark – *Blaise*, standing there and watching them with a slightly confused, guarded look. Her grey eyes held Antares’ then, a message shining clearly in them: *not here*.

Antares crossed his arms, letting the stubborn look come onto his face. So what if he was only *ten* – he knew more than most boys did – she occasionally treated him like this, as if he was *stupid* –

“Where are your parents, Zabini?” Bella had taken her attention from him, and was now narrowing her eyes at the uncomfortable boy, who gulped slightly as she finally thought to release him.

“Only my Dad’s here, Miss,” Blaise answered dutifully, rubbing – unconsciously – at his arm. “He told me to wait outside – I was only *looking* – ”

“That’s what every stupid brat that gets mugged or hit up down on Knockturn says,” Antares said disgustedly. “Wait a minute – you *took* something from Ming, didn’t you?” Scornful hazel eyes raked the dark-skinned boy disdainfully as he hung his head.

“I didn’t *mean* to – ”

“You can’t *take* something and not *mean* to take it, *Bleeze*,” Antares cut in, mispronouncing the name on purpose. He leaned toward the other boy, disregarding his mother’s tight hold on him. “Give it – *now* – I won’t be able to go there again, if you don’t – ”

“And *that’s* not such a bad thing, is it, Antares?” Bella cut in, giving him a dark glare that promised a long, squirm-worthy *talk*. “Don’t think I didn’t see old Burke chasing after you as we ran in here – ”

“*Blaise!*”

A cultured, panicked voice interrupted their conversation from behind, prompting Bella and Antares to turn to see who it was. Blaise perked up considerably, moving immediately around Antares’ tall mother, careful not to touch or disturb the cages that surrounded them. The speaker – Blaise’s father, by the way the twit was hanging onto him now – was a tall, olive-skinned man with arrogant features as haughty and cultured as his voice. His robes, Antares noted, with not a little jealousy, were nothing extraordinary, but practically *reeked* of shiny Galleons in some shiny vault in Gringotts. Shiny Galleons that Antares and Bella certainly did not have.

Antares scowled as the man greeted his mother courteously, stiffly thanking her for finding his ‘errant son’, gripping Blaise’s already abused right arm with a force that spoke of rather the same sort of *talk* that Antares himself would eventually be getting. Risking a look

at Bella, he found that her face was oddly strained, and that she kept blinking at odd places in the short conversation. He held his breath as Blaise's father reached easily into his robe, never letting go of his son, and withdrew what looked like one of those enlarged purses Antares had seen on the richer sort of wizards.

Antares did not relax at the offer of 'gratitude' – he only *hoped* Bella would just *take* the gold – she was odd about charity, accepting it at random times – and they *needed* it, really, what with the funds from her latest job not coming early enough for the rent –

*Thank Merlin* – she was gracefully reaching out a calloused hand, accepting the small bag of coins Mr. Zabini had just Conjured and filled with Galleons. Antares' shrewd eyes counted as they rushed into the bag – he'd *had* to become good at knowing amounts easily and well, as putting yourself in danger for a bag of fifteen Galleons you thought held fifty was a bad way to steal and survive.

*At least thirty*, he realised, eyes widening. Why, that would be *enough* –

"...and thank you, Master Zabini," Bella was saying carefully, her clipped, low tone telling how much she was unsettled. Antares hid a frown – that was *money* they were being given, honestly – *what on earth can be bothering her?* His mother's voice broke, again, through his reflections. "...we are grateful..."

Antares almost smirked. Grateful indeed – they were *starved*, more like, and would have taken fake gold if the man had been – well – careful not to tell them where he'd *gotten* it, or –

"I am in your debt, Mrs...?"

"Black." Bella supplied the name easily – shocking her son in the process. They *never* told their *real* names to anyone – "Bella – *Arabella* – Black." She eyed her fidgeting son, who whose eyes contained an expression of heavy disbelief. Antares wondered why on earth – "It was really my son that did the finding, though, sir – " Antares tried to keep from gasping at her unusual *courteousness*, fought to *hear* what the rest of what she was saying sounded like.



“...and although he got in *and* out, don't encourage him – they like a challenge, you see...”

Mr. Zabini nodded slowly, his dark eyes turning on the evidently frightened boy that flinched at the glare.

“And *you* – we have some *talking* to do – ” Antares winced, remembering he'd have his *own* talk tonight – “...and you'll *return* the items you took and ask – what's his – oh, Antireth, to forgive you.”

“Yes, father.” Was the only answer the now rather cowed Blaise returned. He produced, now, a small, beaten pouch that probably contained nothing but the odds and ends the beggars down on Knockturn carried about for protection. Antares sneered as he took it – *getting hit in the face for stealing a useless bunch of amulets, for crying out loud* – and slipped it into the same pocket that contained the stolen book. At least, he'd be able to return to the Alley without the threat of a beating hanging over him, now. Mr. Zabini tightened his grip on his son, now steering the cowed, unwilling boy away from Bella and Antares.

“Thank you again, Mrs. Black. *Come*, Blaise – ”

And, with that, Zabini the older and Zabini the younger had left the Magical Menagerie.

Bella gazed oddly after them, her face tight as she turned a steely eye on the fidgeting Antares.

“You'll go and return that bag of tricks, Antares,” she said, releasing him finally. “Meet me in The Leaky Cauldron in ten minutes – *ten*, understand?” She eyed him sharply as he hung his head. “And don't think I've forgotten your little steal, either – you'll return it, or pay for it somehow – ”

“But *mum* – ”

“Don't argue with me, Antares,” she said coldly, hurrying him out of Magical Menagerie. “I still need to collect the week's wages from Madame Malkin's, but that won't take time.” She eyed him, standing uncertainly in front of the nearby, busy entrance of Gringotts. “Well?

Get *on* with it, Antares – go, *now*.” And she turned her back on him firmly, and was striding down towards the bustling storefront a few shops away.

Antares scowled, setting off into Knockturn Alley. It would be no use *pretending* to have returned the book – his mother would search him, of course –

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Less than five minutes later, Antares skulked back into the bright, cheery sunshine of Diagon Alley, trying unsuccessfully to wipe his bloody cheek. Ming had been grudgingly pleased to have his amulet collection returned – but Mr. Burke had not been lenient in the least. He’d been deafeningly angry, shouting something about *artecracts* and wildly flailing his arms and wand.

Antares scowled – he’d been lucky to only get away from the frightening old man with nothing but a graze –

Someone bumped into him, hard. Antares kicked out viciously, in no mood to be gracious at *all* – people *never* bothered to watch where they were going –

“Why, you little *rat* – ” A firm hand seized hold of the shoulder of his tattered robes as all sorts of oddly-shaped packages tumbled down into the street. Antares wriggled hard, desperate to get away – Bella would be *furious* if she didn’t find him in the Leaky Cauldron on time – to no avail. Another firm hand grasped his other shoulder, twisting his scowling face into view.

Antares could not believe his eyes – of all the *people* to run into –

Fear coursed through his limbs, and he did what he’d been trained to do in these situations – bared his teeth and bit.

Hard.

The man let go of his left shoulder with a cry, and that was all Antares needed to get an opening, which he used immediately, kicking out at the man and aiming for between his legs. But the hand only tightened on his right shoulder, flooding him with more fear.

Bella had warned him –

*He was so tired, so tired of being cold. Bella was tired too – he could see it in the way her shoulders sagged, the way she desperately quickened her footsteps as the pub lights came into view.*

*Heat and chatter enveloped them both, warming them beyond belief, even though they had not nearly enough for food of any sort. Bella pushed him roughly towards the fire.*

“Go – get warm – ”

*He went, slipping through the tightly packed crowd with some difficulty, drawn by the flickering flames, dodging easily out of the way when they flared a high green, emitting laughing, conversing people. When he could feel his fingers again, he struggled back to his mother’s side at the bar, where she, too, was laughing, though just as cold and hungry. He waited patiently – surely someone would let something fall, and perhaps, they too could buy something to eat –*

*A slight shadow fell across where he huddled, and, pretending nonchalance, he sharply eyed the man that had just appeared beside him. Flexing his fingers, he almost missed the drawn look that crossed his mother’s face as he carefully slipped a small hand into the slightly open pouch hanging loosely at the man’s side –*

“Bellatrix Lestrange – what a surprise – ”

*The talk around them stilled, but Antares’ fingers did not – the pouch was near empty, but –*

“What did you call me?” Antares looked up. His mother’s voice was so sharp, so strange –

“Fancy,” the man said, slowly, smoothly, “seeing you here – in such a state – ”

*Bella’s eyes narrowed into slits as she moved, carefully, away from the bar. “That is not my name...I do not even know who you are– ”*

*“You don’t remember me, Bella?” Antares withdrew his hand, shuffling one or two coins into his pocket – they were heavy – had to be Galleons – catching his mother’s eye, he nodded, sharply.*

*“Why would I?” said Bella, coldly, standing tall, eyeing the stranger. “I am no murderer – which is what you must be to know a Lestrangle...” The men around her quieted, some of their hands going for their wands. The stranger bristled for a moment, then turned sharply away, shouldering members of the crowd to get to the door. Bella stood for a moment, as if frozen, then, her intense grey eyes landing on Antares, gently set down her glass. Antares slinked, frightened, away to the door, knowing that Bella wanted to leave, but not understanding why...*

*He asked her, when they’d got out into the cold, overcast Diagon Alley. Bella’s face twisted with something he’d never seen on it before – fear –*

*“Did you see his face, Antares?” she demanded. At his nod, she paused, ignoring the bustle around them, gripping his cold hands with her warmer ones. “Macnair – Walden Macnair...” Bitterness dripped from her tone as she just stood there, the light snow dusting her long hair, blowing into her re-reddening cheeks. “He’s a Death Eater, Antares – a Dark Wizard, of the worst kind...” She looked behind them, almost convulsively. “If you see him again, tonight – any other night – run, hide, don’t let him see you, understand?” Her hard grip loosened then, and they were walking again, and Antares forgot the man as he showed her the coins he’d ‘found’.*

*And, late that night, when they’d begged their way into a small inn on Knockturn Alley, his mother held him close, and told him the full story about his real mother, and he’d shuddered, then, when he fully knew just how dangerous Macnair had really been, when Voldemort had been more than just a name...*

*Macnair spun him violently around, and Antares caught a flash of features contorted with anger before he was shoved towards the various packages that had fallen from the man. One or two seemed to be torn, leaking smoking, viscous liquids.*

“See what you’ve *done*, boy?” the man snarled, now twisting Antares’ arm. “You’d better know a way to *repay* me for those – they were mandated *Ministry* supplies!” Antares’ heart slowed a notch, even though he’d just gotten himself into even *more* trouble – at least the man didn’t *recognise* him –

Macnair abruptly let go of the frightened boy, letting him trip and fall, almost onto one of the smoking packages. “You just cost me *fifty Galleons*, boy – ” Antares’ heart thudded even faster – *Merlin*, Bella would *skin* him –

“Walden?”

The grim man turned abruptly towards the newcomer, who appeared just on the edge of Antares’ blinking vision. He somehow avoided the packages, falling on bare flagstone instead. He hit the ground on his hands and knees – *you learn things like this, when you’re always in trouble* – and was up in a flash, ready to escape.

But – “Oh no you *don’t* – ” – Macnair’s hard grip was on his arm again, and the man was twisting him around to face the other person – a wizard, it looked like – and handing him off.

“Hold the brat for a minute, Severus – won’t have him breaking anything else – ”

All Antares could do was scowl and *think* and notice how bloody big a nose ‘Severus’ had attached to his ugly mug, and *squirm*, testing the limit of the newcomer’s grip as Walden Macnair, muttering angrily to himself, picked up the scattered packages as the crowd around them streamed on by.

“Don’t bother trying to escape,” came a low, smooth warning from above. Antares wriggled again, just to *show* the bastard, but was promptly shaken, hard – the way Bella did it. The hook-nosed man began to speak again – “Where are your parents, boy?” The man twisted him round, looking hard into his face, black eyes narrowing oddly.

“Not talking to you,” Antares muttered, scowling as he stilled. Hooked Nose raised an eyebrow, still scanning his face.

"It *talks*," Macnair sneered, now shrinking down the unharmed packages and stuffing them into a pouch he produced from his robes.

"Indeed," Hooked Nose replied dryly, putting a smelly, long-fingered hand to Antares' chin, forcibly turning it this way and that. "Speak *up*, boy – unless you need a little *persuasion* – "

Antares bit his lip – *Bella must be going spare*– and answered, correctly judging as the safest thing to do, when in the hands of a former Death Eater and his friend. Or whoever the hell 'Severus' was – Antares kept back a shiver – *he* looked much like a Death Eater himself –

"Dead," was his short answer. Hooked Nose snorted, exchanging a glance with Macnair, who, was checking a silver pocket-watch, looking rather disgruntled. "What's it to you, anyway? I don't owe *you* anything – "

"Wrong," Hooked Nose fished around out of sight, and handed what looked like a Gringotts moneybag to Macnair. "Don't look so pleased, Walden – you'll repay me that sum or find your Firewhiskey laced with something unpleasant come Sunday evening."

"You and your threats – " Macnair shook his head, relieved, now Vanishing the mess the smoking, torn packages had made. "I'll give your money, never you mind – " Looking round, as if in a hurry, Macnair nodded at Severus. "Thanks, Severus – I've got an appointment down on some manor in Tutshill – can't be late for that – " And, with that, he'd disappeared, leaving a slightly less fearful Antares behind with the bored-looking Severus man, who gave him yet another stern appraisal. Antares scowled up at the man, hoping against hope that somehow, *somehow*, he'd get away –

"You can forget about escaping me this *moment*, boy," Severus informed him immediately, causing him to jolt in surprise. "Parents dead, indeed – I just saw you leave the Menagerie with someone *you* seemed to think was your mother." Antares' heart sunk down into his toes – he would be in so much trouble now – "The Leaky Cauldron, I believe it was?" Antares nodded reluctantly at a glare and shake from the man. "Good – follow me, or you'll regret it – "

Antares trudged after the man, heart thudding in his ears. What would Bella say – he'd certainly lost them the lucky windfall from that dark-skinned kid's father now, as well as some of the rent...He sighed and slowed unconsciously, prompting a glare and none-too-gentle push from Severus.

All too soon, they were at the busy archway, and pushing past enthusiastic shoppers to enter the dark dinginess of the Leaky Cauldron. Antares wished hard, for a moment, that Bella had left to – look for him – but there she was, grey eyes flashing with anger as she spotted him, and then – *fear*, as she saw who he was forcefully escorted by.

The man stopped suddenly, and Antares knew, without a doubt, that he'd seen his mother. His heartbeat seemed to fill his ears as he wondered, horror stringing through his limbs, if *this* man, too, was a – a Death Eater –

"Severus." His mother was the first to speak, tightly, fear marking her face and posture like a brand. Antares blinked – that was *definitely* a bad sign, Bella knowing Hooked Nose's name. The man's grip tightened horribly on his abused right arm with that word, and his mother stood very, very still.

*What have I done* – Antares thought, wildly, to himself. If only he'd not *taken* the damned book –

"Bella..." The man's voice was hoarse – with what, Antares couldn't tell. Bella wasn't even *looking* at him – just staring straight into Severus' eyes, some kind of conversation taking place without words – The man's grip seemed to lighten, just a bit, as Bella licked her lips, the usual enticing gesture seeming nervous, filled with fear. "The boy...?" Severus' voice faltered as Bella lifted her chin a fraction in what resembled her usual pride.

"My son." Those words made Antares want to cringe, want to hide – if not for him, if not for his stupid, itching fingers and eyes that *wanted* things, this wouldn't be *happening* – "Let him go." *Please* seemed to hang in the air, unspoken –

“You can trust me,” the man said slowly, his grip loosening on Antares’ arm just a bit – not *enough*, bloody – “Bella – *trust me...*”

Bella’s cheeks were stained with emotion, her eyes bright with mingled fear and hope. Grey eyes rested on Antares’ slightly trembling form for a moment, asking forgiveness.

She nodded. Antares gulped – who knew who this Severus was – who knew if they could trust him –

“I teach at Hogwarts, now,” the man offered, his voice lowering enough that no one else could hear them above the rowdy customers in the pub. Bellatrix’s eyes widened a little, her breath coming faster. Antares felt a smidgen of hope worm its way into his heart – maybe this wasn’t so stupid, trusting this man. He stopped trembling, carefully angling his head so he could see the man’s slightly shadowed face. Bella had never told him very much about the only school for wizards in Britain – just that it was a safe place. Surely Death Eaters didn’t teach at safe places –

“At Hogwarts,” Bella was saying, slowly, nervously licking her lips again. Antares watched the dark head nod above him, and saw how his mother seemed to relax. The man shifted, seeming to twist to see something behind himself. Antares looked too – there was a disturbance at the Muggle entrance – people crowding around it, for some reason –

And then he caught sight of a small brown head and a familiar scar amongst the hubbub, and realised. A half-sneer, half-grimace rose to his face almost involuntarily as the small, round-faced boy was ushered towards them by a greying, familiar-looking wizard.

It was the Boy Who Lived, of course, accompanied by his odd werewolf of a father. Antares rolled his eyes, watching the way normal wizards parted before the pair, who he’d seen enough times in Diagon Alley to grow bored of their (to him) rather plain faces. Antares tried to exchange an annoyed look with his mother, but found that she was not looking at him – her grey eyes were locked on those of the dark wizard beside him, whose grip on Antares’ right arm was steadily lessening in severity.



“Come.” Severus pulled on Antares arm impatiently, now leading him and Bella towards the large, worn fireplace, which flamed green with Floo powder about every fifteen minutes.

“Where are you taking us?” Bella asked, unusually quiet. Severus gave her a long, even look, before replying.

“Spinner’s End – you remember.” Dropping two Sickles in the small box nearby, he offered Antares’ mother a handful of Floo powder, which she hesitantly took.

Antares watched as she disappeared, after quietly calling out the odd name, the clear message in her eyes lingering with him.

*Follow me.*

And, though unsure, he stretched out his own hand, and, stepping into the green flames, called out, as quietly as he could, the same thing as his mother.

“Spinner’s End!”

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*A/N: Bloody hell, this was hard to write. Hope y’all enjoy it...A couple questions.*

*Did you think I characterised Bella properly?*

*What do you think of ‘Antares’?*

*Does the story sound like it has a plausible explanation at all?*

*Am I crazy for even attempting this thoroughly?*

*Do answer – it helps keep me on track.*

*Oh, and, by the way – Antares means rival of Mars, and is the first star in the constellation of Scorpius. And Perseus means the saviour of Andromeda. So now you know where I got my rather silly names from. :)*

***EDIT as of 24th November 2005:*** As y'all see, I've finally made good on my musings about canonising Blaise properly. So now the scene with his dad (or, perhaps, stepdad) means more – the poor man would be really pissed at him for wandering off like that, as he's probably be skewered open by Blaise's mother if anything happened to her, and teh hawt secks or whatever Blaise's mother does so well would slow, decrease, or cease altogether. ;)

## **Chapter 2: Spinner's End**

Bellatrix Black had never been so afraid in her life, spinning through the Floo Network as she hoped and prayed that her son – all she really had in the world – was following her, unharmed.

She landed awkwardly, with none of her usual grace, hastily shifting out of the way so – just in case Antares had a bad landing, he'd never quite taken to the Floo –

*Whump.*

And there he was, sooty, blinking away the disorientation from the travel, running dirty fingers through his hair like she always told him *not* to, other hand reaching out, like he'd stopped doing four years ago.

He'd said, then, that it made them less conspicuous, or something like that. Bellatrix simply took his hand, drawing him tightly to her side, her wand ready, just in case Severus had decided to harm them anyway, as it would be more convenient to do so in his own home –

*Whump.*

Bellatrix's heart sped up impossibly. Severus had always been somewhat graceful with every form of travel – she tried not to let her hand shake, tried not to let the fear roll off her in waves turbulent enough to alarm her son, even if she did think she'd made a serious mistake.

Antares moved reflexively closer as the black shape unfolded before them, indifferently spelling off the soot and eyeing Bella when she did not do the same. Bellatrix held her head high, a sneer rising easily to her lips – she'd take her chances with the bloody soot, rather than be distracted for a second, rather than let go of –

"Come – come this way – " Severus beckoned to them, his frame taut with anxiety. And well that he was anxious – Bella had made it her business to make those around her uneasy as soon as she'd begun to see the need to have a real life. She followed gracefully after a minimal brush-off of soot from her worn robes, head held high,

Antares firmly grasped by the skinny arm – *he must be hungry, not to be squirming* – trailing her former ally easily into a less formal, but no less disused sitting room.

Bellatrix hardly paid attention to the book-lined walls or the worn couches – no, her grey eyes were seeking points of entry and exit, points of defence, things she could throw or hit out with, if this didn't –

"Relax, Bella." Severus dropped easily into a worn armchair facing her and Antares, who was now beginning to relax. Bellatrix pinched him unobtrusively – *now is not the time to be distracted* – before replying.

"Who do you serve now, Severus?" Bellatrix did not wish to dance around the topic – it was like a large, stinking monster in the room with them, reflecting in the former – well, at least she *thought* so – Death Eater's eyes. Antares straightened at that, and it was all she could do not to sigh – ever since that unfortunate evening they'd run into Macnair in the Hogs' Head, he'd been morbidly interested in Death Eaters.

It was her fault for telling him in the first place, she supposed.

Her fault for *joining* at all –

"*You're* straight to the point," Severus remarked slowly, his dark eyes still tracing her form.

"Can I afford not to be?" Bellatrix demanded, fighting the impulse to shield Antares with her body. Never had fear played through her veins like this, like a constant counterpoint to their stilted, formal conversation. Perhaps that was how victims of her attacks had felt.

Perhaps.

"You cannot." His black gaze held hers for a moment before he spoke again. "And yet you are here..."

"We are here because Antares got himself into *trouble*," Bellatrix snarled back, her grip tightening unnecessarily on her son. *Dear Merlin, if anything happens to him* –

"I understand." Severus' dark gaze traveled down to the little boy at Bella's side, making her burn with the irrational need to tuck him away into her robes – "What did you call him?"

"Antares." There was no harm in that –

"Antares *Black*?" Bellatrix stiffened, the movement not going unnoticed by her wide-eyed son.

"You *know* Rodolphus threw me off – like some *rag* – "

"What I *didn't* know is that you were alive enough to *be* discarded, Bella." Severus' tone was direct, slow, calculated to set her at her ease, but dear *Merlin*, she could not afford to –

"Here I am, then – flesh and blood, a Black once more..." She smiled cruelly, not caring what he'd be *sure* to infer –

"A Black, indeed – it amazes me that you do not shrink from the name of an imprisoned traitor, Bella," Severus sneered.

Predictable – he'd always hated her stupid cousin. Bella's smile grew bitter, as she reflected on the fact that she hated him as well – he was the sole reason Antares felt the need to *steal*, that *she* felt the need to pretend she had enough pride *left* to try and stop him –

"You did not answer my question, Severus." Antares' small arm twitched approvingly in Bellatrix's grip as she locked eyes with Severus. *Good – he caught that too* –

"I serve myself, as I always have," the dark man across from them said slowly, his intent gaze trailing over to Antares' nervous face again, "and I always will." Bella felt herself relax – just a little – but not for long. "Are you hungry, boy?" Antares started, but recovered soon enough.

"I don't think that's any of your business, sir," the boy started, his voice steady despite the slight quiver in his frame. "I'm here only because my *mum's* here, so don't think you'll have to offer me charity just because I'm a kid squirming in your house." Snape stared at him

for a moment, surprise playing across his sharp, heavy features, then turned amused eyes back onto Bella.

“Quite a talker, isn’t he?” he put forth, more by way of saying something even as his eyes flickered over to Antares’ defiant little form again. “He looks very odd – like Regulus, somehow – ” Bella drew her breath in sharply, tightening her hold on her son without meaning to, even as her one-time colleague continued to speak, almost lazily – “You must have used one of the older charms...a blooded one, I presume...?” At her stiff silence, Snape stiffened slightly in surprise. “Those are Dark.”

“*And?*” Bella could hardly hold the words in, hold in the acidic pressure that had been building up within her chest. “It was the simplest way...and, besides, one of the conditions had already been met.” She looked away from Severus, so he could not – would not see the memory of that cold, cold morning. “It was the way my Aunt finally took pity on me, in the end – before she died. If not...”

“Does he know?” The cool, calm nature of that question did not faze Bellatrix – oh, Severus might not show it *now*, but she knew what he thought of her. He was *judging* her – his face oddly still, somehow *pitying*...Antares’ sharp little voice broke through her angry thoughts, all of a sudden.

“Don’t you *dare* judge my mother, Snipe,” came the familiar, tone – much colder than Bellatrix had ever heard it before. Snape started in surprise as Antares struggled out of her grip, glaring at him. “You were a Death Eater, weren’t you? I’m sure you’ve done *much* worse things than she’s ever done in your miserable, greasy life – ”

“*Antares!*” His face, taut with childish anger, spun round to look at her, even as she tried not to laugh or cry or *scream* at his defence – “Sit down. *Now.*” That he complied only made it worse, and it was all Bellatrix could do just to take tighter hold of his already abused arm. “I assure you, I was just as bad as he was, I keep *telling* you – ”

“That’s even *worse*,” her son spat back unexpectedly, “him judging you when *he’s* had it easier this *year* than we’ve had in the last *five* – ”

“Antares, *please*,” Bella’s eyes bored into his defiant hazel set, which boiled with a familiar anger. She let go of his arm, tugging on his wrist instead, knowing that it soothed him, when he got so angry about their situation that he couldn’t, and wouldn’t think. Antares had had moments before – dispelling frightening amounts of accidental magic, breaking everything in sight and collapsing like a rag doll immediately afterwards and alarming her more than anything. This could *not* afford to be one of those times – not in her former colleague’s house, not when she already owed the thoughtful, quietly intense man across from her fifty Galleons.

Antares’ shoulders finally drooped, and the air around them felt lighter.

“I take it he’s magical, then.” Bellatrix stared at Snape, wondering how he could say such a thing, such a thing that had single-handedly torn apart her ordered existence, with such *levity*. Feeling rather inclined to break several of the ugly ornaments around them herself, she forced the answer out through gritted teeth.

“Extremely so.” Tilting her chin defiantly, she continued – “Regular bursts of accidental magic at three. First occurrence possibly earlier.” She smiled grimly to herself as Snape stiffened, taking notice. Antares stiffened too, beside her – with pride.

“When did you find him?”

“After the trials.” She would *not* be speaking of those – of the experience of being literally forced to testify to save her own skin –

“What did you do beforehand?” Snape’s surprise seemed to have melted away, into a look of bland, focused curiosity. Bella sighed, her heart falling within her as she remembered those days – long, full of pain.

Full of nothing but memories, and fragments of a world that had shattered so quickly that it had been unreal...

*“Why should I trust you? You’re a Squib, you foul woman...”*

*It was fundamentally fascinating, how one could hiss insultingly around such pain.*

*Only a Black. Only a Black – no longer a Lestrangle – no longer a wife*  
–

*Bellatrix felt the hysteria press at the edges of her mind, seeking purchase – its progress only interrupted, only stopped by the harsh, cynical laugh of the bent woman kneeling beside her.*

*“It’s that or expire, I’m afraid.” And the Squib’s words were right, were so painfully true that Bella wanted to weep, wanted to wail out her disbelief at the awful situation, and why she was still in it...*

*“I recovered.” Two words, so much meaning – so many memories –*

*“Eat, girl. You were pretty once – don’t scowl, I can see it – and you will be again.”*

*“Why? Why do you care?” The older woman’s dry chuckle was without much humour.*

*“Because you’ll need it, child. As sure as I need that damned walking stick...”*

And she had, during the worse stretches, when smiling in a certain manner encouraged men to buy her – and her son – meals, and not force her to pay quite as much as other witches and wizards. Bella had done some things she hadn’t been proud of, but they had been *necessary* – unlike her deluded actions with her mad, treacherous master and his other mad servants. They had been necessary to keep her and Antares from starving to death, and Bella would not, would never let herself regret her few nights of shame.

Squeezing her son’s warm, thin arm, Bellatrix forced herself to go on, not allowing herself to see, to *consider* the odd expression on Severus’ face. It would feel better, somehow, she supposed, having someone else know, even if it was only the hazy outline of the past ten years that she would reveal...

*“I was left for dead, after the – the discovery. Someone found me, somehow, in a Muggle graveyard. I still cannot remember much from the rest of that year, as the person was – unable – to – to use magic.”* She eyed the dour man challengingly, expecting him to say



*something* at that, and, when he made no visible response, went on. “I felt it the night the – the Mark – disappeared. I left my rescuer then, looking for news.” Bellatrix looked away, staring at her free hand, which was grimy and not half as elegant as it had ever been. “The Ministry caught me quickly, of course, and threatened me with death if I told them nothing.”

“It was you, then...?” A slow nod answered his hesitant, awkward question. He nodded again at her, dark hair sweeping messily into his face. “Go on...”

“I spoke, of course. By then, my – my former *husband* had been apprehended. He’d told everyone I was dead, of course – it was a shock, for him to see me. I was lucky, about the timing of my capture – they’d just caught him and that little Crouch bastard torturing Longbottom’s – or, rather, Lupin’s *mother*, of all people. All they needed was a little crying about how abusive he was to me, about how he’d forced me into serving – his *Lord*, and then...” Bellatrix’s shoulders slumped. “You can easily estimate why you didn’t see me, after that.”

“You said your Aunt helped you? *Mrs. Black* helped you?”

“Yes.” Bellatrix shot a fond look at her son. “She always had a soft spot for me, you know. I think she knew – about my condition – because she left me something. Not a lot, but enough that we would have been *fine*...” her voice trailed off bitterly at the recollection of what had followed. “The Ministry blackmailed me out of it when they found out she changed the terms of the will. Certainly didn’t want me inheriting enough to live on, dear *Morgana*, no – they told me it was payment. For my sins.” Her lip curled. “I went back to – to my rescuer, and that was when I found Antares, starving in some Muggle orphanage. I could see he was a wizard, as plain as day, and I adopted him – took him to meet her...” remembered fear sliced into her, as she remembered just how *hard* that journey had been, with no money, no possessions, only an awkward wand she’d grudgingly been allowed, by the Ministry – “She never took to him, of course. He is stubborn, and was already a thief by then.” Severus snorted, settling back into the shabby armchair, looking resoundingly disbelieving. Bella shrugged – she was hardly going to praise her son

in that way, not *now*, while he sat tense beside her, eyes fixed on her instead of (as would have been more prudent) on the shifting Snape, who was speaking again.

“The Headmaster still believed you were alive,” he said, dark eyes seeking out her own. “I did not – not quite. It makes sense now, I suppose – the invisible traitor that betrayed us all...” Severus’ eyes drifted over to Antares again as the tense silence settled on the three of them; searching, no doubt, for any traces of his traitorous nemesis in the boy’s tanned, suspicious face. Bellatrix held her breath – this was it – “Will you be sending him to Hogwarts?”

Bella relaxed her grip on her son’s arm, hardly daring to believe, hardly daring to believe that the naturally vindictive man was not going to do *anything* to them both. She spoke, trying to mask her piercing relief and lingering, heavy doubt.

“Of course, Severus.” He looked up sharply at the use of his first name, sensing that something had changed in the flow of the stilted conversation, and coloured slightly when he read the gratefulness Bella knew was displayed openly across her face. “I remember the Hogwarts Assistance fund – he will apply for that, and any further funds there might be. Merlin knows,” she allowed herself a long look at her stubborn son’s dark head, “he is hard-headed enough to do well, there. Besides,” she drew herself up slightly, “I still have some of my old things left.” *The ones I did not destroy in my folly, after graduation. After Rodolphus proposed...* “He can use those, too.” Severus nodded slowly, his eyes taking on a faraway look for a moment, before he asked what she hoped would be his last question – Bellatrix’s eyes flitted rapidly to the worn, ancient clock on the wall opposite them. Their landlord would be expecting her soon –

“Bella, where are you staying? You could...”

“No.” she found herself saying, without even waiting for the man opposite her to finish speaking. “No,” she repeated, trying to convey the roiling feelings within her as she looked at Severus, who appeared slightly grimmer than before he’d spoken. Bella held his eyes with hers – she would not be beholden to anyone for the care of Antares – she *would not*, and that was *final* –

The fireplace roared with green flame, and a disembodied voice called out, startling all three inhabitants of the sitting room.

“Severus? Are you there – ”

“In a moment – use the kitchen hearth, will you? I have guests...” He trailed off, rising uncertainly to his feet. “Bella – ”

“The answer is still no. Don’t keep your caller waiting.” He strode off, slipping through one of the slightly ajar doors nearby, into what she presumed would be his kitchen. Bella felt her heart constrict – it was all very well, asking her to stay, as if he’d forgotten *everything* they’d seen together, as if she wouldn’t fear for Antares and his cursed curiosity in this house, despite the intensity in Severus eyes that spoke of trust.

That caused a miserable hope to rise in her stubborn heart, a hope that spoke of slight comforts and peaceful surroundings –

The very boy at the heart of the matter stood abruptly beside her, wriggling out of her relaxed grip as he went across to the cooling fireplace.

“What are you doing?” Antares glanced back at her over his shoulder, shrugging as he crouched over the fireplace.

“Something you should be doing, instead of worrying about what you just told him,” he supplied, with the scornful tone of a tired, irritated ten-year-old boy. “What do you *think*?” Rolling his eyes – carefully, so she almost didn’t catch sight of the expression – he pressed a palm to the cooling hearth stones, angling his head up into the fireplace as he mouthed a simple eavesdropping charm.

“I wouldn’t bother with that, Antares. He’s a suspicious man – you *know* that – ”

“Didn’t do me any harm to *try*,” he groused back at her, clambering back to his feet as he crossly wiped himself off. “Why did you say no, anyway?”

“Why should I tell you my reasons? You know very well why I do not accept *charity*, Antares,” Bella’s eyes followed her son’s young, skinny form as he tiptoed about the room, peering at the copious amount of books everywhere. “It can be used against us, against *you*, and I will *not* allow that.”

“So?” Antares came to an abrupt halt, returning to her side, an alarming amount of passion displayed on his usually calm features. “What happens when I go to Hogwarts, then? The only *reason* we can get by living in Muggle London is because people feel *sorry* for me and don’t ask questions when *I* do things wrong, and *you* know that. What could possibly be so frightening about living with Snipe, or Snape or whatever the hell it is you – ”

“Neither of us can trust him, Antares – ”

“If you didn’t *trust* him, then why did you let him bring us here? And why are you telling him *anything*?”

“Because we had, and still have no *choice*, Antares. We owe him money, don’t we?” Antares blanched, sinking slightly into the seat beside her. “What is it?”

“*Technically*, we don’t owe him anything,” he said carefully, his hazel eyes looking nervously up at her.

“*Technically!*” Bella seized Antares by his skinny wrists, forcing him to speak to her – she could *never* understand why he didn’t *tell* her these things, especially things like *this* that might mean they could just *leave* – “Explain yourself – *now* – ”

“I ran into Macnair, not him,” he said quickly, “he took the debt off Macnair because he thought he recognised me, or something – ”

“*Macnair*? Did he – ” Antares shook his head, just as quickly. Bella squelched the urge to sigh in relief – at least no one would connect her with him for a while –

“Sni – Snape kept looking at me, as if he was remembering something,” Antares continued quietly. “I was really worried, when he mentioned you – I thought he’d Apparate us out and just do us in on

the spot..." He looked down at his wrists, which Bellatrix had let go of, in her shock of discovering that he'd run into *Macnair*, of all people – "He hasn't so far, Mum – we *could* stay – "

"Not you," Bellatrix managed to get out, past the mingled hope and fear coagulating in her throat. "I won't be beholden to anyone, not for you – "

"And after I leave? I won't go to Hogwarts if you're not safe..." Bella sighed, brushing his messy hair away from his thin face, bittersweet pride surging hotly through her blood at the intensity of his expression even as they heard footsteps approaching the door Severus had left them through.

"Already such a manipulator." She planted a quick kiss on his head, not minding the soot that dusted her lips afterwards. Antares smiled up at her for a minute – his sly one, the one she thought made him as handsome as her faithless ex-husband, in a different way – the serious look lingering in his eyes.

"I meant what I said."

"I'm sure you did," Bella replied, a wry smile tugging its way onto her lips. Severus entered softly, as was his wont, looking measurably more hopeful, in his way.

"I have just spoken to the Headmaster, Bella." She stilled – he could not be serious, telling her such information – "He offers an apprenticeship of sorts, for Antares, if he consents to take the requisite tests."

"But the Assistance fund – "

" – is a separate endowment entirely." Severus regained his seat, a curious expression on his face. "Apparently, the tests have not been necessary, or requested for quite some time. He believes your son deserves a chance."

"That's preposterous," Bellatrix said, worry dancing in her veins. "Why would he do such a thing – for *me* – for *us*? He knows nothing of my affiliations or my allegiances – "

“As much as his words surprise me, it is perfectly clear what your allegiances are, Bella,” Severus said, with a trace of something like amusement.

“My allegiances are to myself and Antares *only* – surely he can guess *that* – ”

“But you helped his side of the war, though unwillingly, with your confession,” Severus retorted, crossing his arms across his chest. “And you have paid for it, perhaps more so than anyone else. It is not *charity*,” he said, bitterness seeping into his tone as he went on, not quite looking into her eyes, “it is merely a clumsy way to repay what you have done in aiding the Ministry in putting away some that they would not have been able to otherwise – ”

“I am no fool, Severus,” she snapped back, ignoring the way her heart twisted at the bitterness in his voice, “I know this is repayment. What worries me is what Antares will be asked to pay in return for this apprenticeship *of sorts*, nothing more. I do not mean to offend you – you *do* know that, don’t you?”

“Then accept my offer to lodge you. You know as well as I do that you are not safe working on Diagon Alley – ”

“How did you – ”

“It was too easy to follow you after I caught sight of you outside the Menagerie, Bella.” He leaned slightly forward, his expression intense. “Did your son tell you who it was that originally owned your debt to me?” At her terse nod, he continued, his dark eyes flicking to Antares as he spoke. “What do you think would have happened if Macnair had decided to pursue the matter of your debt to him?”

Bella did not answer – she knew all too well what could have happened to her and her son. It was simply galling the way one simple afternoon had destabilised her and her plans so thoroughly –

“Bella,” Severus said, his black eyes holding hers with a disquieting intensity, “all I offer is help – nothing more.” Bellatrix sighed, inwardly giving her acquiescence. If only so she would not worry for her son.

If only that he would be safe, especially from those who meant her ill for her treason.

“Thank you, Severus. We will accept your help.”

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*A/N: Gah, that took a while to sort out. Sorry it took me so long to update – it was just a hard chapter to finish wading through, and what with my busy week and wrestling with Chapter 8 of **Part the Second**, it just languished on my lovely laptop for a bit.*

*Um, didn't find any pressing questions from reviewers that I haven't already answered in my livejournal ([www . livejournal . com / users / uchethegirl /](http://www.livejournal.com/users/uchethegirl/)). But, just to lay your minds at ease, I will be answering all the pertinent ones as the story goes along – there won't be any huge expository chapters, as I want to mostly show you how the wizarding world is different, instead of just tell you. You can already guess a bit from the contents of this chapter, namely that Alice Longbottom is alive and remarried, and her son will probably be more of an upstanding character than he is in canon. And as for Bella's stilted behaviour around Zabini senior, I'll just jump the gun and tell you it's brought on by shame that she no longer commands respect, or is recognised widely. Or something close to that.*

**EDIT as of the 24th of November, 2005:** *Changed the reference to being 'kedavra-ed' to being done in instead, as Antares, as a kid raised in the Wizarding World, would never refer to the curse as commonly as that. Thanks for the person who raised that issue on LJ (although I can't remember their name now).*

### **Chapter 3: Shopping With a Thief**

Severus Snape sighed for the hundredth time he had done so that week. It was positively maddening sometimes, sharing his home with strangers – not that Bella could technically be considered much of a stranger, considering he'd maimed and tortured alongside her for a few years. But the *boy* –

"For the last time, Antares, you are *not* going out with your hair in that disgraceful condition – " Bellatrix LeStrange – no, Bellatrix *Black's* harassed voice filtered down the stairs, accompanied by an irritated muttering that, no doubt, belonged to her errant son.

A son, Severus thought uneasily to himself, tapping his tightly booted left foot impatiently, whom he was rapidly beginning to think he would *never* be able to fathom. He sighed again, checking the sturdy timepiece on the wall of the smaller, shabbier sitting-room, noting the large, ancient hand that was dimly flashing "Time to be gone" in a faded, nearly unreadable script. Bellatrix – or, as he allowed himself to call her, Bella, was changed, by ten years of hard, uncertain living and the existence of the brat charging heedlessly down the stairs at the very moment, wild black hair barely restrained into messy ponytail.

She was quieter, for one. And she'd retained all that stern beauty – certainly possessed the same pride, the same fire he'd once aspired to, before he'd learned the ignominious truth of who the mysterious Dark Lord *really* was – what he really *did* –

Severus glared at the young man, giving no notice when *he* gave no notice. He'd quickly come to understand some of her newly gained placidity of temper within the first week of her stay at his house on Spinner's End – which, he felt surprised to remember, began about a month ago, well before the brat's birthday and the succeeding confusion surrounding the apprenticeship tests he would take.

It was relatively simple, to be honest – the boy could be *infuriating*, and could aggravate one so many times a day that to react at everything he did would certainly be to drive oneself mad. And, as Severus Snape was not in the habit of driving himself mad on purpose, he soon followed Bella's unsatisfying placid lead.



“Can you get some powder for me?” the boy remarked, scratching dirty fingers in his scalp in a manner Severus and Bella had been unable to curtail. At the glare he received, he only smirked and continued. “I can’t very well *reach* it on my own, can I Mister Snipe?”

“Snape – I keep *telling* you, boy, that it’s *Snape* – ” Antares Black broke out into a grin that reminded him oddly – *maddeningly* – of another Black. Severus supposed, angrily, that Bella’s temper had had ten *years* to deal with her foolish son’s cavalier mode of dealing with elders, and that –

“You shouldn’t let it get to you, you know,” Antares replied coolly, easily taking the Floo powder Severus grudgingly handed over. “You should know I only ever say it to wind you up by now.”

“*Wind me up?*” The impertinence of the boy was simply outstanding at times, the way he talked to Severus as if –

Antares rolled his eyes amusedly. “If *you* think I’m stupid enough not to know your name by now – ” he paused, shaking his head. “And to think you nominated me for an *apprenticeship* at Hogwarts – ”

“I did *no such thing* – ”

“Oh please – you’d have argued with Dumble – well, *the Headmaster*, if you knew I didn’t have two Knuts to rub together, in-intelligence-wise.” Antares stumbled a bit over the word, but looked ridiculously proud that he’d actually managed it. Severus allowed himself a sneer – not for lack of *trying*, of course – “The Leaky Cauldron, right?” At the older man’s grudging nod, the *fool* threw the powder into the flames and actually *stepped in*, calling out the location as he spoke. Severus stood there for a minute, watching the boy’s spinning form disappear – he’d told the boy several times; he was supposed to *wait* –

“The Leaky Cauldron!” he snapped, flinging far too much powder into the flames, anger licking at his insides. It dimmed somewhat as he saw Antares standing carefully just out of range of the boisterous wizards and witches that had evidently just come out of the very grate he now stepped out of. *At least the brat didn’t run away, or some other such rot* – “What on *earth* were you *thinking*, boy?”

“What?” Bewildered hazel eyes snapped to his, and their owner began to fidget. “Oh – I shouldn’t have Flooed before you, should I? Sorry – I keep forgetting, ‘cause Mum always used to go after me, and – ”

“*And?* I told you several *times*, boy – ”

“And I forgot,” the boy returned, looking perplexed. “Honestly – just a mistake – ”

“A *mistake*,” Severus ground out, seizing Antares by his left arm and dragging him for the Diagon Alley entrance, “that could get you *killed* – surely you understand your mother’s situation – ” But the boy was wrenching his arm from Severus’ grip –

“Let me make something clear, *Snape*,” he hissed, eyes narrowed in an almost comical display of temper, “you may *think* you understand my mother’s situation, but you don’t – you’ve had it easy, swanning about at Hogwarts while we froze our arses in the worst slums of Exeter just trying to find food. If you’ve never had to drink your own blood to stay alive, then you can take your *advice* and shove it. And *no* – I won’t tell you whether either of us have. Because you already know more than enough about our secrets, and trust me when I tell you that *that* is saying something.” The boy paused to take a breath, not seeming to see the way Severus’ mouth was hanging inelegantly open. “What’s our first stop, then?”

“Boy – ”

“It’s *Antares*, thanks. I’ve said what I’ve been dying to say, right? We can get on with this now, can’t we...?” Severus, not knowing whether to cuff the brat or laugh at his odd manners, decided, with a deep breath, to pretend the one-sided conversation had not happened.

*For now.* Severus tapped the brick on the entrance with his wand, keeping tight hold of it as he did so. The way Antares eyed the action bore no good omen for his conduct on receiving his *own* wand, as he would today, if all went well. *Another twitchy brat to watch in Potions*, Severus told himself firmly, eyeing the boy as his dark little head swivelled lazily. He could almost swear the boy was keeping an eye on the more wealthy wizards as they passed the pair by. He resisted

the urge to shake himself, taking out a list from his robes – *the hip pocket, I should* – there. For all Bella's boasts, the raggedy lad had stolen not one item from the old cottage on Spinner's End, as far as Severus could remember.

"Gringotts first, to pick up the note of credit Dumbledore will have left for our use," he laid slight emphasis on the name, for *really*, the b – well – the *brat* should know by now how to say the name of the most powerful wizard in all England – "then we will go through your Hogwarts list, and – "

Antares filched the list from Severus with a move that he barely saw, scanning it boredly, leaving Snape empty-handed and – for the barest moment – empty-mouthed.

"You," Severus settled on, "are trying my patience, Black." Antares shrugged, handing back the letter diffidently, looking considerably less excited to be on the bustling street. Severus ground his teeth – this boy was so –

"Not very exciting, is it, that list," said boy observed, head swivelling absently to follow a rather large, bustling witch dripping with gold. Severus nearly stopped walking – the *nerve* –

"I do believe I must apologise for the inability of the standard student equipment list to *quite* live up to your expectations, Master Bla – "

"We can get everything on Knockturn, I think – apart from the wand, and maybe the cauldron and the scales – "

"You must be *joking* if you think *I* will take you shopping on Knockturn Alley, you young fool – "

"*Morgana* – I practically *live* on Knockturn Alley, of *course* we're going there. It says I need black robes on the list, doesn't it? I'm hardly going to be able to afford those pricey fittings at Malkin's, am I – you seem to forget that Bella and I – "

"*Mother* and I." Antares had stopped looking

“*Whatever* – that Mum and I are currently almost living off of you. Considering that she thinks Madame Malkin doesn’t like her and may be sacking her at some point this month, I’d buy even my wand second-hand if I could.” The boy paused for a moment – for air, he’d been speaking almost non-stop – “Actually, maybe not my wand, but – ”

“Bella fears for her only source of employment, and she did not inform me?” Severus interrupted, stopping short without realising it. After all he’d said, after all he’d done, she *still* didn’t trust him – it was more galling than he’d ever thought it would be.

“My mother, you mean?” Antares replied, giving him an impertinent look. “Why should *you* get to call her Bella when I can’t?”

“For Merlin’s sake, Antares – just answer the question – ”

“It’s not that she doesn’t, erm, like you or anything,” the boy ventured, seeming to sense the underlying impatience in Severus’ impatient rejoinder, somehow also saying the very thing Severus had been horrified to see pop up in his treacherous brain in reaction to the fact. “She’s not *sure* – she’s got good instincts with people, though, so she’s probably...well, right. Unfortunately.” Antares paused again, looking sharply up at Severus with those too-old hazel eyes – “You’re not angry she didn’t tell you, are you? She barely even told *me*, really – ”

“I feel nothing of the sort, I assure you,” Severus snapped back, even more irritated that the boy should be able to see so easily into his thoughts, or even guess at them, “I am merely disappointed that she thought not to inform me, that is all.”

“Right,” Antares muttered, not managing not to sound as wholly unconvinced as he looked. “You – you won’t tell her I said anything, will you?” He looked really anxious now, a rare expression for him. Eyeing him critically, Severus had the nasty thought that it suited him rather better than that mocking, arrogant little set of his face.

“No,” was his only reply to the boy’s guarded, yet earnest plea, and it seemed to satisfy him. Severus shook his head inwardly – for all the boy’s faults, he *did* seem to care deeply about Bella, which was, in

Severus' eyes, his only redeeming factor. It would also be rather convenient at Hogwarts, he supposed, as they passed the bustling Madame Malkin's and drew closer to Gringotts. Fear of the Headmaster looked ever more unlikely to surface in this boy, but fear of his *mother* – now *that* would probably keep him in line, and with far less fuss and posturing on the boy's part, as would be inevitable in Albus' presence.

"Wow," Antares breathed as they entered the marbled and gilded banking hall, his voice taking on a tone of awe that suited it far more than the one of childish scorn.

"Have you never been inside?" Severus found himself inquiring incredulously – surely Bella would have had *some* cause to be here –

"Yeah right," Antares snorted quietly, eyes darting here and there, his skinny, ragged frame stiff with what looked more to be admiration than fear.

"She never had an account? I was of the opinion that she did, from what she said of your Great-Aunt," Severus continued, unable to resist prying further. No telling whether the boy would retort with some other cheeky comment or veiled insult, but it was worth trying.

"Nah, gave it up ages ago. I remember the fees alone were about as much as what we were earning at a point," Antares remarked quietly, seeming to be in a forthcoming mood. "It wasn't hard to decide, really. Just a bit of logic." He looked longingly in the direction of a plump, demurely dressed young woman who was leaving the hall with her bag of Galleons slung haphazardly across her shoulder, fingers actually twitching.

"That's a shame," Severus remarked slowly, steering the boy somewhat out of temptation's way for the busy little desk in a corner of the hall that handled letters of credit and such matters, an uncharacteristic twinge of pity rising again and again as Antares' head swivelled smoothly, hungrily, in almost all directions. "An account is needed to receive your scholarship funds, and it will be hopelessly complicated to open one in your name – "

"I'm going to get a *Gringotts* account?"

“Eventually,” Severus conceded, rolling his eyes at the boy’s visible perking up. “For today, we will simply withdraw enough funds to purchase what you will need from my account – the goblins are very conscientious about allowing such privileges for scholarship customers.” But Antares was staring glassy-eyed into space, probably imagining the unthinkable luck of getting a filled Gringotts account essentially, to him, for free.

The short line was brisk, and Severus soon found himself conversing rapidly with the surly-looking fellow – Cranook, or something, he was sure of it, he’d met the bastard once before. On mentioning the amount that he wanted withdrawn from his account, however, he became immediately aware of an insistent tugging on his sleeve.

“Not now, boy – ”

“Five hundred is bloody ridiculous,” Antares said anyway, ignoring the shrewd stare Cranook was now giving him. “If I get everything but my wand second-hand at the *right* places, it shouldn’t be more than two-fifty, honestly – ”

“Two hundred and fifty, including your needs for the school year?” Severus snapped in return, wishing they could just get this *over* with –

“Two hundred and fifty is more than enough, even if I go mad and buy amended second-hand robes and gorge myself and five friends on cake on the Express,” the boy replied insistently, jutting out his chin in a manner that was oddly familiar. “Trust me – if we run out, we can always get more...”

“Professor Snape?” Cranook said insolently, sharp eyes sweeping interestedly over Antares as he stared stubbornly up at a frustrated Severus. “If you would be so *kind* – ”

“Two hundred and fifty Galleons, Cranook,” Severus cut in tersely, fingers itching to rub the bridge of his nose. It was far too early in the trip to be utterly sick of the sound of the boy’s voice – “Thank you. Come, you – ” he jerked unkindly on the irritatingly satisfied Antares’ arm, practically having to drag him away from the dry stare of the

goblin, who was now attending just as rudely to a harried-looking Indian witch.

“No need to take my arm off,” the boy muttered half-heartedly, head still twisting this way and that, which it continued to do until they had left the cool banking hall and were once again in the slightly stuffy Diagon Alley. Antares gave a final sigh, scratched at his hair *again*, then set off for Knockturn Alley with an unnerving amount of confidence in his thin little frame. “Right, here we go...”

The next hour turned into an eye-opener of the extremely fascinating kind. Antares proved himself true of his – rather miserly – word, not deigning to neglect the least Knut in his haggling, sometimes cajoling the unwilling proprietors into giving out extras. He was obscenely chatty with the stuffy witch that ran the run-down second hand robe shop in the darker, more dangerous street, and consequently got an extra-thick winter cloak for nearly nothing. Severus tried not to stare, now, at the violent negotiations taking place over a set of slightly worn, yet serviceable ingredient scales between Antares and some shifty-looking old hag.

“You might as well rob me, you young bastard,” she was snarling now, despite her shameless palming of the Galleon and few Sickles Severus had grudgingly handed over.

“Why would I pay to rob you of a set of fucking scales, Harrina?” Antares said, amusement finally showing itself in his – shockingly crude – language. Severus shot him a sharp look, which he ignored, giving the hag a parting smile with a rather nasty tinge to it, for an eleven-year-old. “Honestly, can you imagine that?”

Severus grunted in reply, and Antares shrugged, checking the list the older man was running his weary gaze over.

“Great, just Potions things left,” he remarked unnecessarily, already turning himself in the correct direction. Severus followed easily, relieved that the boy, at least, was proving himself to be smart enough to keep out of trouble. Really, it was almost a pleasure watching one so young haggle like an unscrupulous adult. “Ooh – haven’t seen that in there before...” Antares halted suddenly at the

dirty windows of Burgin and Burke's, peering at some odd-looking item.

Then again, Severus thought darkly, Antares also had the most questionable taste in 'interesting' items, some ranging from the relatively innocuous (a snake-shaped candle holder that had glowing amber eyes) to the outright dangerous. The current item Antares was oohing and aahing over in the dirty shop window belonged to the latter category – a fairly long length of woven, bloodstained silver hangman's rope.

After prying the brat from the window – no telling what kind of curses were on *that* unsavoury item – Severus half led, half dragged him into the smaller apothecary, telling him sharply to find and amass the ingredients he would need for Hogwarts so he could take his time to talk with young Dalwell, the underfed, ominously cheerful clerk, about the special order of mandrake roots he'd made earlier that week. Unfortunately, the level-headed, adult conversation Severus had been half-looking forward to was not to be.

"Terry! You twat, where've you been hiding your scrawny arse this last month?" Antares looked up from the large barrel of beetle eyes, a mere hint of guilt already showing itself in his form. Severus gritted his teeth, hoping the idiot boy wouldn't be foolishly indiscreet –

"Bella and I got lucky," he said, trudging over with his arms full of the ingredients he'd already collected. "Remember that stupid Asian kid, pretty much getting his head bashed in by Ming and that lot?"

"The one what nicked Ming's bag of charms? He's still alive?" the clerk leaned forward conspiratorially over the counter, his body language obviously settling into a position suitable for a long, seedy gossip. "Bet he is – bet you went playing the hero again, never could resist that, could you, Terry? But tell us anyway."

"Don't be daft, Tim, I just ran up and distracted them, that's all," Antares said, scowling slightly. "And got paid for running his skinny arse out of Knockturn to boot – I wasn't playing the *hero* –"

"Yeah, yeah," 'Tim' replied, shaking his head as he motioned Antares forward with his booty so far. "Whatever you say – hey, this is a



school set you're doing, isn't it?" Antares' expression lightened considerably as his hazel eyes went dreamier than usual as he set the ingredients on the counter – a good set, actually, everything fresh. Severus inwardly rolled his eyes – this was so –

"Yep – starting in a week or three, more or less." The boy's chest seemed to swell with pride. "And it's *Hogwarts*, too." And, from there, the conversation degenerated further into rapid, nearly unintelligible questions and answers and random statement.

"Merlin's bloody garters – how can you afford it? Did they – "

"Yeah, havin' a bit of help from the school – "

"Got your robes, then, have you? That's a bit less than an ounce – here, let me – " Antares fidgeted as the clerk began to rapidly add up his purchases, looking round as he answered – or rather, did not.

"Couldn't find the powdered bicorn horn anywhere – or is that usually on the list?"

"Help from the school, eh? You lucky sod – Hogwarts is right costly, but they're the best in Britain – "

"Yeah, I got my robes from Lady Tamlyn. You know, that dotty old – "

"No bicorn horn on the list, Terry."

" – she even gave me a winter cloak for almost *nothing* – "

"She gave you what? Oh, Professor Snape – you're here about the mandrake roots, aren't you?" Severus sighed, nodding. *Finally* he'd actually been noticed – "They'll be in tomorrow – our supplier had a terrible delay coming over from France last night, poor sod fell off his carpet – "

"Aren't those illegal?" Antares cut in, eyes sparkling foolishly. Probably at the thought of owning one such carpet, the young fool –

“As long as the roots are here by the end of next week, I couldn’t care less if your unfortunate supplier drowns himself on the way home. This is the *third* time he’s delayed – ”

“And we’re very sorry, sir – my uncle should’ve known not to trust that fuzzy old coot. We’re at a shortage, though, and he was the only one – ”

“Spare me,” Severus cut through the clerk’s blather as soon as he could, gesturing towards a fidgeting Antares, who was eyeing a barrel of live adders with very round eyes. “What do I owe you?”

“Not much, just – about – two Galleons, really.”

“Two? Just two?” Antares piped up uncertainly, before Severus could say anything. “That’s really low – ” To the tired Potions Master’s chagrin, ‘Tim’ winked back at him, pocketing the shockingly tiny payment from Severus’ grudging hand.

“Isn’t everyday I get to help someone who deserves it, is it?” he said easily, stashing away the coins. “And you’d best be off if you’ve not got hold of your wand yet, Terry – I heard Mr. Ollivander’s closing up shop earlier than usual today.”

“Thanks Tim! See you sometime – ”

“Which you certainly *will not*,” Severus hissed, hurrying the irritating boy along – if the happy-go-lucky clerk had informed them that Ollivander’s would be closing ‘earlier than usual’, then the shop would almost certainly be on the point of closing *now* – and that would mean rescheduling the apprentice testing at Hogwarts, which would be nigh impossible so close to the start of term. “Come along, boy – ”

“I was just saying *goodbye*, for goodness’ sake – it’s not like I see him every day, or like I even want to – ”

“I will tell you this only once, Antares,” Severus worked out, dragging him past Borgin and Burkes and propelling him through the much denser crowd to the left, where Ollivander’s lay. “There are certain kinds of people it is not in your interest to befriend, once you are a student of Hogwarts. Your ‘Tim’, I am *not* sorry to say, belongs in that

category. You would do well to associate yourself with the best of those you meet at Hogwarts, instead of – ”

“You missed something, Professor,” Antares retorted, squirming angrily out of his grip – such a trying little – “Blacks do not *grovel*. Blacks do not *beg*. I’m not going to lick someone’s boots just because they had the luck to be shat out in the right house or out of the right witch, thank you – ”

“*Language*, boy. Do yourself the favour, then, of not revealing your origins to those who would think less of you for them in your house,” Severus snapped in return, heart lightening as he saw the absence of the antique letters reading ‘CLOSED’ on the grubby shop window. This trip would be over soon, thank Merlin – “Especially not if you are sorted into Slytherin.” The boy huffed slightly in disgust.

“As if a Black could be sorted anywhere else,” he muttered under his breath as Severus propelled him through the door, only to find –

*Oh buggeration –*

– Alice Longbottom-Lupin, or whatever aberration of a name she called herself now, the Boy Who Lived in tow. Severus sighed inwardly, chancing a quick glance around the still, silent room, and nearly sighed again with gratitude when he found that her irritant of a husband was not present. Still, it meant that Ollivander had certainly not closed for the day, and that, even if the odd old man had planned to after serving the illustrious – Severus sneered – couple, he would not do so now, if only for politeness’ sake.

“Good afternoon, Madam,” Severus rolled out, glaring down at the fidgeting, over-excited Antares in an effort to make the dratted boy keep *still*. Alice Lupin (he’d drive himself round the twist bothering to mention the name of her first, equally disgustingly illustrious husband) smiled uncertainly his way, nudging her sleepy-looking son out of his (undoubtedly insipid) inner reverie.

“Good afternoon, Professor – to what do we owe this honour? Neville,” she nodded meaningfully in the still drowsy boy’s direction, and Severus found himself hard pressed not to direct a properly invigorating insult his way. There’d be time enough for that, wouldn’t

there? He fought the urge to close his eyes in despair. *Seven years of time* – it was enough to make a man ill.

“Good afternoon, Professor Snape,” the Boy Who Lived droned, eyes taking in Severus for what apparently was the first time. “Sir.”

“And who is your young friend, Professor?”

“There’s no need to be civil to me, Alice, when you’d rather ignore me and finish purchasing your vaunted offspring’s wand,” Severus finally burst out – who did she think she was, concocting strained, well-meaning conversation with him while she stroked the (*pudgy*, he thought viciously, *definitely pudgy*) head of the young brat that had put paid to the bloody Dark Lord, thereby topping every one of Severus’ painstaking achievements put towards the true downfall of his one-time master.

“There’s no need to be rude to my mum,” Neville Lupin piped up, his voice going rather small towards the end as Severus focused his glare on him. “She didn’t – ”

“Why, Severus Snape – haven’t seen *you* in these parts recently,” a soft, familiar voice said, interrupting Severus before he’d even got out the proper response to such disgusting – “And what have we here – Alice Longbottom – oak and unicorn hair, springy, wasn’t it?” Mr. Ollivander smiled genially down at a wide-eyed Neville, who was staring raptly in his direction. “Shall it be Mr. Lupin first, or shall it be...” his voice trailed off as he looked in Antares’ direction. Severus could not keep from following the heat of the man’s gaze – no telling what the brat would be – oh, for Merlin’s sake –

“Black! Put those down *at once!*”

Antares jumped guiltily, hurriedly dropping the wand boxes he’d been poking at in the corner of the storeroom, unnoticed until now. His gaze, however, was anything but contrite – the stubborn expression in his hazel eyes was quite possibly the –

“Mr. Black,” Ollivander said slowly, as if tasting the word on his tongue. “You will be second, I presume – and, unfortunately, my last customer for the day. See that you replace those wands, lad.

*Properly.*” And, with that, the thoroughly unnerving old man swept down a series of dusty boxes and began to encourage Lupin the Younger to try them out, while directing the worn measuring tape Severus remembered so clearly – he’d wanted dearly to hex it on his first visit to the shop – darting over to Antares, who was abashedly replacing the wand boxes he’d been poring over. Ollivander grew more excited the more wands a pale Neville (calling him Lupin any longer just raised old simmering grievances) did not suit in the least, bustling importantly about, until –

“Wow...” A shower of gold-red sparks filled the room with the typical showy brilliance of a child destined for Gryffindor from the womb. Antares gave a sort of half-disgusted, half-wistful sigh, slim hands twitching as he eyed the untidily stacked boxes lying here and there in the aftermath of Ollivander’s trial with the Boy Who Lived.

“Well *done*, Neville,” Alice Lupin whispered tearfully, prompting an eye-roll from Severus. Really, it was nothing but a *wand* – a holly and phoenix feather wand, to be exact. An unusual combination, Ollivander had smilingly said, on presenting the overawed young fool with the unremarkable thing, but nothing more. It pleased Severus more than it should have, that Neville Lupin had had no more accolade than that – maybe it would deflate his fat head a little before he arrived at Hogwarts –

“And now, for Mr. Black,” Ollivander said, putting away the Galleons Alice Lupin had cheerfully paid him in a dusty till, a somewhat stern expression crossing his face. Antares quailed visibly at being called forward, but kept his chin level, prompting another burst of alien sympathy from Severus. He knew what it was like, to be suspected and looked down upon, for nothing more than a name and shabby clothes. Ollivander handed the reluctant young boy one of the discarded wands lying nearby – *the gall of him, giving him that overproud little shit’s cast-offs* – “Maple and dragon’s heartstring, just the very thing...yes, give it a good swish...”

Antares swished it rather violently, eyes narrowing a little, and Severus felt a sharp spark of anger at the old man, for daring to try and –

“Well, well. Obviously not – here, Oak and dragon heartstring, how’s that...no? Hmm...” Ollivander sorted carefully through the boxes, pale eyes narrowed in contemplation as he passed over several open boxes, before stopping and snatching one up. “Right – Birch and dragon heartstring, a bit odd, but...aha – ”

As Antares, whose interest in the process was beginning to overcome his hurt pride, gave the wand a careful, bored twirl, weak bubbles blossomed from its tip. Ollivander snatched the wand back, nodding satisfiedly as he repackaged it immediately.

“I believe we’ve found your wood, young man – now for the core – ”

Birch wands were produced again and again, mostly of dragon heartstring or unicorn core, and again and again, some weak, muted effect occurred, and Ollivander would sigh and furrow his brow, looking curious.

“Most curious, this – never had someone so set on a wood, yet without a...core – here, try this, won’t hurt, Birch and phoenix feather...aha.” Ollivander’s pale eyes shone solemnly down at Antares as he gently took the wand from the boy’s impatient fingers. “But not quite...not quite.” The man continued to produce a stream of similar wands without a success, until – “Hmm...wouldn’t hurt to try those...” He darted away between the shelves, humming to himself, singularly absorbed in his task. Not a moment later, he emerged with five more boxes, looking apologetic.

“I’m afraid these are the last few wands I could find, Professor,” he said formally, shifting the ungainly narrow boxes in his arms as he came opposite them. “If none of them chooses Mr. Black, I may have to do a custom – Mr. Black, do not – ” But Antares was already reaching for one of the boxes surreptitiously, and in jerking his hand away, he managed to knock them out of his arms and onto the floor.

“Sorry,” the boy offered hastily, but he was staring at the only box that had not opened uncertainly, with oddly quivering fingers. Mr. Ollivander ignored him, picking up the unopened box with an oddly wary expression on his face. He silently opened it and gave the wand to a clearly unnerved Antares, who gave it an awkward, hurried sort of half-swish –

Beautiful golden thread shimmered softly in the air, falling gently to the ground in a shower of tiny golden sparks. Mr. Ollivander's face paled oddly, then regained its inscrutable look. "Well, I believe you have found your wand, young Black. That will be seven Galleons, Severus." Pale eyes pierced the confused Potions Master, following him even after they'd paid and started to exit the shop.

"That was so..." Antares trailed off, looking apprehensively at his innocent-looking new wand, then up at an equally flustered Severus. "There's nothing *wrong* with birch, is there?" Severus gave the boy his most concentrated look of disdain and a dismissive shake of the head immediately, just to reassure him. Of course there was nothing wrong with birch as a wood – perhaps a bit effeminate in the wrong hands, and Antares was anything but. He ducked a harassed, low-flying owl – *stupid fool, sending a message by private mail in daylight* – and tried to rein in his anger at Ollivander.

What on earth had the man been *thinking*, pigeonholing a Black in that manner? Neville Lupin's cast-offs, indeed –

"I can't believe he tried that Lupin boy's leftover wands on *me*," Antares persisted, carefully stashing his wand away. "Was it the thing with the boxes? I was just curious, really, and they were just lying there –"

"Perhaps," Severus allowed untruthfully. "It was unspeakably rude of you to do so." The look on the old wandmaker's face gave him pause – perhaps the wand *was* Dark in some way. But, then, *birch* – birch was nowhere near Dark as far as woods went. So –

"Are we going home now?" Antares said softly, interrupting his thoughts. "I'm sorry I ruined that –"

"You did nothing but display an error of judgement, Antares," Severus snapped, tugging him through the busy archway between Diagon Alley and The Leaky Cauldron. "Come – we have spent more than enough time here, I tell you –"

And that was finally, mercifully that. Although Severus would later remind himself to discuss Ollivander's strange behaviour with Antares,

now was not the time, when Bella was grinning down at the excited boy and touching his wand almost as reverently as he was.

“Well done, Tares,” Severus heard her whisper, during the brief hug that followed her examination of the suspect wand. He tried not to pause in his walk up the stairs. Tried not to linger to hear the soft-spoken affirmation an utterly changed Bellatrix Black would give her son – affirmation that stung oddly at him in a way it had never, and would never do for Alice and her brat son.

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*A/N: Yikes, this chapter didn't come easy. I tried to do it in a different POV, dropped it for a while, then started messing with it again, because I felt like it. My head hurts a wee bit. Forgive me any ghastly errors towards the end - I'm rather sleepy at the moment, and will change anything that's not done properly if it's pointed out to me. Please review – how did you think I did on the Ollivander scene, eh?*



## **Chapter 4: The Trials of Antares Black**

It was the day of the Apprentice Tests, and Antares was sure – no, *convinced* that he was either going to die of a heart attack, of his mother's haphazard, unusually nervous fussing, or of Snape's glare.

Or, he thought desperately, as Bella reached for the (evil, he was convinced of that as well) comb on their rickety bedside table with a look of determination while Snape sneered on at him, *all three, at the same time*.

"My hair's *fine*, Mum – "

"Your mother only wants what's good for you, Black – you keep your mouth shut and *sit still*, or else." The stubborn feeling Antares did not know whether to call courage or stupidity withered and died as Snape's inhuman black eyes stared him down. He kicked angrily at the chair as he finally stilled his restless limbs – it simply *was not fair*, this being frightened into submission by the greasy, overly stern Professor. It was just that Snape's expression seemed to promise so many kinds of retribution at once. Antares wished dearly that he had the same expression – or could make up one that replied easily to it.

"Ow!"

"Keep still, and it won't hurt as much," Bella remarked impatiently, her hand keeping a steely grip on his forehead as she dragged the comb (instrument of torture, honestly) through his tangled hair. "If you'd only let me do this every morning – "

"Ow!"

" – you wouldn't have this problem," she continued, her tone hardening in the manner that meant No Argument. Antares gritted his teeth as Snape folded his arms and watched the painful scene for a minute, smirking all over his face, the smirk widening each time he cried out.

*Greasy git – oh ow –*

Antares only just managed to stifle the next cry, determined not to give Snape the satisfaction, and to his disgust, the Professor only *nodded* in that patronising manner of his and turned his back on the whole thing, going to rummage in Antares' scuffed second-hand trunk. "Leave my trunk alone, for the sake of – "

"Keep your wild mane on, boy," Snape remarked, a bit distractedly, "I am merely ascertaining if you've set out all the things I asked of you."

"Wha-ow – "

"That's the last knot, Antares. Now, for goodness' sake, stop whining."

"Can't help whining when you're pulling my scalp to bits – "

"As we both know, this is your fault and yours alone. If your hair is matted when you return from Hogwarts, Antares, I *swear* – "

"I can't see why I can't do my fucking hair how I like on *holiday* – "

"By that definition, you've been on *holiday* for the last eleven years, you lazy boy! Blacks are *not* scruffy – how many times do I have to tell you?" Severus snorted lowly, but was ignored by both mother and son as Bella kept up her rhythmical, almost painful strokes. "So help me, Antares, if I hear that your grooming is *anything* but impeccable at Hogwarts, you," her voice went low and dangerous, "will be *in trouble*." Despite Snape's muffled snort at the threat, Antares shivered, for being *in trouble* with his mother was no joke indeed. He'd had the folly to be *in trouble* with Bella only once – and the results of *that* were better left to the imagination.

He was sure he still had the scars –

"Black! Why are your writing supplies in your trunk and not with the rest of the list?" Snape barked out suddenly, cutting through Antares' vague, remembered horror. "Did I not *specifically* tell you to include quills, ink and parchment for the tests?" Antares coloured guiltily – he'd heard that the Hogwarts Apprenticeship tests included written stuff, actually, but had rather hoped it wasn't a serious requirement –

“You didn’t tell me there were written tests last night, Antares,” Bella said, twisting his head up to hers carelessly.

“Ow – ”

“Severus, are you in earnest?” Bella asked, letting go of his aching head, her hard tone now sprinkled with barely-acknowledged anxiety. Antares felt something tighten in his chest – he’d never get the extra money now –

“I would not have mentioned it to him if I was not,” Snape said coolly in response, extracting a good amount of the things in question from Antares’ trunk. “The tests are both practical and written – I do not begrudge your ignorance on the matter, the thing is rarely needed, you see – ”

“I see,” Bella said tightly, her eyes boring into Antares’ neck as she too-calmly stroked fingers through his smoothened hair. He could nearly *taste* her disappointment, her fear –

“Why did you not inform your mother that there were written tests, boy?” Snape remarked irritably, still occupied with the trunk.

“Shall I tell him?” Antares asked quietly, feeling very small as he awkwardly got to his feet, the expression on his mum’s face hitting him like a physical blow. He didn’t really want to tell the Professor – he wanted to tell Bella he’d do without, that he’d be okay, really, on the normal scholarship fees, and he knew how hard she’d take it, she with her dreams of glory for him, for the Blacks. And him with his stupid stealing fingers and not much else –

“I might as well,” she snapped back at him, taking in a quick breath as she turned on the slightly confused-looking Snape, not missing a beat – “Antares cannot write and read very – very well,” she began slowly, her tone containing a hint of self-blame that made him feel even worse. “There was always something that needed doing, or needed watching, something I could not afford to – ” Mum took another sharp little breath, “ – well. There was never any time, and he was better at other things – ”

“But – why did you not...?” Snape started, looking very startled and –  
“Why didn’t you – ”

“Don’t make it about her,” Antares cut in, almost violently, because he couldn’t stand to see that little self-blaming bent in his mother’s posture – “The reason I can’t read or write for shit is because I was out stealing. It was always more important – ”

“How on *earth* can thieving be more important than attending to your education?” Snape cut in, puzzlement and anger evident in his face.  
“Do you realise – ”

“It’s more *important*,” Antares found himself snarling, “because we were *starving*, and reading and writing brilliantly don’t pay the rent, or buy you robes – ”

“Oh, *stop*,” Bella said tiredly, taking the seat that he had vacated. “I should have made you, we both know that. And *no*, I will not take it back, Antares,” she said, giving him a very final look. “I suppose the tests will be cancelled, won’t they, Severus?” The man had been fidgeting, almost guiltily, and started a bit as Mum addressed him.

“Not necessarily,” he said, stroking unconsciously at his large nose, staring hard at Antares, whose cheeks still burned of their own accord. “Perhaps...” Snape frowned, advancing on him, who felt a ridiculous urge to shrink down, out of the sight of that appraising black gaze. “Just how well do you read and write, boy? You cannot be *entirely* illiterate, as you seemed to read your school list well enough.”

“That’s because it wasn’t in, er, bigger words, s-sir,” Antares said lowly, reddening further, “and it was all ingredients and robes and stuff – I can read and write stuff like that no problem. It’s stuff like the Headmaster’s name and – and words like, erm, ‘intelligence’ that I’ve got trouble with.” He paused, thinking hard for a moment – leaving out anything would be worse than admitting such embarrassing stuff – “And I’m not too sure what grammar is, either.” Looking up at the Professor’s expression, Antares felt even more embarrassed – Snape was looking down at him with an almost unguarded expression of such pity and disgust –

“We will still attend the tests, Bella,” – *thank you very much, talking over my head*, Antares thought, a little bitterly. They were *always* doing that, now, especially when it came to things about Hogwarts – “If I explain to the professors and the Headmaster, I am sure allowances can be made for Antares.” Mum gave Snape a long, steady look, then nodded slowly, still silent. Shame burned at Antares like a living thing – the way it looked, Snape wouldn’t have bothered to take him if he’d only just *said* last night, instead of – “Good *grief*, the time – come, boy, we must be off.”

Antares folded further into himself, only just remembering to kiss Mum on the way out. He knew he wouldn’t get this, just *knew* it, and the fact that Snape was trying to help him at all just made the knowledge even more painful.

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Half an hour later, after tumbling queasily to his knees at the Hogsmeade Portkey Platform, Antares felt like a million things were scrabbling away at him at once – shame that he really was going to fail this horrid scheme of tortur- tests, and an irrational longing to just be ‘on duty’ in Hogsmeade, which looked rather dull in the way of the size of wizards’ moneybags. He yearned to be flipping loose pebbles into the gutters of Knockturn, or racing with the beggars for no real reason, or poking about at Borgin and Burke’s, or –

“Mind your feet, boy,” Snape snarled down at him, seeming not to understand how bloody odd his billowing (and, from the look of them, a bit on the warm side) robes made him seem, like some gigantic, large-nosed creature of the dusty road which they were swiftly walking down now, surrounded by spots of bare rock and interestingly green grass that Antares might have found more interesting if the road wasn’t made of Things That Tripped You Up and Made The Professor Glare At You. His little bag didn’t feel very little anymore, and he was really starting to wish that Snape had at least thought to bring a drink – it was getting to that time of day when the cool morning gave way to almost hot sun that blinded you and made pickings slim, as wizards tended to speed up and huddle alertly away in the shade when it was warm here.

Then again –

“For the love of Merlin, *please* stop talking to yourself, you little – ” Snape stopped mid-grate, sighing at the huge – oh Merlin, Morgana and the Saints, absolutely bloody *huge* – castle looming ahead of them. “Thank goodness, we’ll be there in a few minutes – *mind your step*, for the love of – ” And there Snape said a rather foul word that Antares couldn’t help grinning at and glancing carefully up to see if his pale, pale cheeks reddened. And they did, too – seemed the esteemed Potions Master of Hogwarts wasn’t averse to feeling embarrassed –

And then an absolute mountain of a man emerged from the double doors they were now approaching, and Antares fought not to duck behind Professor Snape. He was shaggy all over in the way scary, drunken wizards were shaggy all over, and *impossibly* huge – could probably break a kid’s neck without hurting his fingers, they were bigger than Butterbeer bottles –

“Good morning, Hagrid,” Professor Snape said, sweeping on by with not much of a wait for a reply, leaving the – slightly quaking, only *slightly* – Antares bereft and bare. No protection against Haggid, or whatever –

*Why on earth is he going so white? I’m the size of his arm, for crying out loud –*

“So this is the apprentice, eh, Severus?” Haggid piped up, frightening eyes trained on Antares, who realised, with a sort of detached horror, that he had gone Very Still. “What’s your name, lad?”

“Black,” Professor Snape called over his shoulder, an oddly vindictive tone entering into his normally sarcastic voice. “Come *along*, boy – haven’t got all day – ” Antares scurried along without so much as a backward glance, disregarding whatever prickly feeling running down his spine told him to just look back, to just check if he was safe, as looking at Haggid again was the very last thing he ever wanted to do. Again.

“What was *that*?” he found himself asking, a little desperate as he caught up to the Professor, finally feeling himself safe enough to sneak another look back at the sadder, fiercer looking Haggid. “He doesn’t – doesn’t *work* here, does he?” Snape snorted loudly, and

Antares realised he already knew the answer. "He's not going to be testing me or anything, is he?" He managed to get out, steadying his voice as best as he –

"Really, boy – you venture fearlessly into Knockturn Alley, and yet you cannot even face down a bumbling, mere half-giant," Professor Snape said, giving him a disdainful look. "I have yet to understand exactly *why* –"

"Because the beggars and thieves of Knockturn can't strangle me with two *fingers*, that's why," Antares retorted, anger and shame mixing heavily in his gut. "You try being as small as I am, he looks like a bloody giant from down 'ere. Bet *you* were never picked on –"

"Do not presume," Snape suddenly said, rounding on him in what could have been a most scary manner, if Antares had never seen him absently plucking leek from between his (rather nasty) teeth at least twice, and actually starting to do the dishes the Muggle way, once upon a very embarrassed time – "to know *anything* of my situation, or of my past. Keep your trite little observations to yourself, or I'll –"

"Hit me?" Antares shot back, as they turned a corner and headed up some stairs that were – actually moving, they made him feel a bit off – "Please. You probably aren't as good at it as Be – Mum is." Snape stared at him, then snorted again, moving on. "Snort all you like, Professor. Be – Mum's good at stuff like that. You might be better with a wand 'cos you're younger or whatever, but she'd probably pin you in an unarmed fist-up."

"You think so?" Snape inquired, turning The Nose his way with what looked like some ghastly kind of Snape-smile dancing on his thin lips. "Really. How fascinating." Antares scowled – he was always so *sarcastic*, Snape. Couldn't really win either way, because – "Finally. Here we are – this is a spare classroom we set up for you to take your tests in," Snape motioned swiftly at the ajar, worn wooden door set in the stone walls of the castle. "The tests will encompass the whole day, of course – but none of that now." Snape turned, and his cloak went an interesting *swish-swish* and furled so well that he had to stifle the urge to ask if Seve – Snape had actually designed such a one on purpose. "Dumbledore will see you now, firstly, before all the

other relevant professors, such as the Charms Professor, as well as the Transfiguration, Defence Against the Dark Arts congregate here for the actual theory and practical tests. In you go..."

Antares, after a quick, rather intense look to make sure that the dour man – the now agitated dour man was *quite* on his trolley, followed the direction of the pale, pointing finger from his sort-of-guardian, Snape. Meet with the *Headmaster of Hogwarts himself* – he'd thought they'd have some dotty old witch or wizard that handled the entire thing, like at the Ministry, as someone had once told him –

"Come in, come in," a rather genial old voice said absently, accompanied by an odd sort of half-squawk, half- – oh, there seemed to be a bird, flying agitatedly around the classroom, so beautiful and so *red* that Antares quite lost himself in the thought of something so – "Don't worry lad, he won't hurt you," the old voice called out again, from closer by, which was rather alarming. Hands sweating with nerves, Antares shuffled properly through the door and found himself in what was obviously an old, rather dusty classroom with only two desks, one large and one small, and rather more chairs than he could account for.

Maybe that was part of it, knowing what the chairs were *for*, or –

And the bird began to sing, and Antares wasn't quite so sure what it was doing, but it definitely made him feel better, more suited to see the old, old, rather oddly dressed man that was walking easily towards him, radiating some tangible sort of presence that would've made sure he steered clear of him on the street. The old man stopped a respectable distance from him, blue eyes following the brilliant bird now approaching them both, one hand absently stroking his full white beard, finally settling on something behind Antares.

"You," the old man said decisively, "must be Antares Black. If you would pardon Fawkes' excitable behaviour at the moment..." – for the bird was now doing oddly fast, yet graceful loops around them both – "You see, he finally reached his maturity this morning, and the days of confinement to his cage, after his Burning Day, were rather trying for him, as I was away on business."



“Phoenix?” Antares cursed himself – *what kind of idiot makes one-word answers to insanely powerful old men telling you about their pet bird* – but the man that he just *knew* was the Headmaster simply smiled, and nodded at something behind him. Antares found himself turning almost involuntarily, hoping hard that the familiar, comfortably stern Professor Snape was not – his shoulders drooped – leaving him with the Headmaster.

“Please sit,” the Headmaster said, walking quickly to the large chair behind the much larger desk (obviously meant for a teacher of some sort), motioning to a rather small, lonely chair right in front of it. Antares gulped as inaudibly as he could – no sense in showing fear – and moved for the chair, dropping his bag as neatly beside it as he could. He kept his twitching hands away from his neat hair, because he wanted it to *stay* that way. “As you must already have guessed – you are a clever young thing, as is evident in your being here – I am Professor Dumbledore, and will be your Headmaster at Hogwarts whether things today,” the bird landed with a scrape of claws on the polished desk between them, making Antares jump visibly and curse himself for doing so (hopefully non-visibly), and Dumble – the Headmaster adjusted his half-moon glasses, with an oddly mischievous twinkle in his stern blue eyes, “go well or not. I assume Professor Snape has told you of the various tests you will be taking...?”

“Yeah,” Antares said, ashamed that his voice cracked on the low answer. “He – er – said they’d last the whole day.” Antares cursed inwardly. He’d managed to get a whole bloody sentence out, and the *Headmaster* was petting his phoenix, looking rather absent about the whole –

“Yes, yes. Thankfully all the requisite professors needed to assess you are present, and should be arriving, with Professor Snape,” Antares went Very Still, “any moment from now. I believe you have had breakfast, Mr. Black?”

“Um, yeah,” Antares said, in a very very small voice. So *that* was why Snape had left him here – to fetch the other professors. *Right*. He straightened a little in his chair, bolstered by the sparse comfort that familiar Snape’s black gaze and nasty smirk would be present with

him throughout the day. He felt like an idiot for doubting it – Bella would probably have *flayed* the pale, stringy man alive if he failed today and mentioned (perhaps through a fit of very un-Antares tears) that Snape had not been there. Couldn't be because he cared, or something daft like that – Professor was so practical about things that he probably filled the space reserved for his heart with more brains instead. So he could spoil easy dishes and make finicky ones from scratch, and disparage the cauldrons in the shop on Diagon –

“Any concern you would like to share with me, Mr. Black?” Dumbledore – no, that wasn't it – *damnit, answer the question* – asked easily, cutting through the wild, rambling thoughts of Antares and bringing him face to face, once more, with the pulsing, fascinating thing that was his fear of this horrible situation. He shook his head in reply, unable to even *dare* to jeopardize his chances by saying he couldn't *spell* – they'd just throw him out, wouldn't they, and tell him to come by with the rest of the richer students, and – “Very well,” Dumbledore – *that has to be it* – said slowly, as if he could see all the jumble of fear and regret and longing that Antares could feel squirming around in his chest. “Ah – here they come – ”

And there they came, indeed – led by a scowling Professor Snape, all chatting amicably and looking formidable and all very large, except for –

“Albus! Is this the child? Frightfully thin, the poor thing,” Antares tried not to squirm back in his chair – it was rather unnerving, seeing such an old, goblin-like man of that size wearing a smile. The goblins he'd met were always rather angry about something or other, and this tiny old man positively beamed happiness and excitement at him. “What's your name, lad?” And his voice was squeaky, too, it was really –

*Answer him, you idiot!*

“A-antares Black. Sir. Mr. Um – ”

“Flitwick! Professor Flitwick, dear boy. A Black, are you now?” And it was really odd, the man's voice – Professor Flitwick's voice – seemed to sadden a little, and his cheery smile droop just a bit, and Antares wondered if his bloody *hair* was escaping its tight ponytail, and fisted his small hands so they wouldn't betray him –

“Erm – I’m not so sure – ” Antares stammered automatically, heart racing – Bella had always told him to *never* tell strangers who he really was, and –

“Looks like one to me,” a stern, no-nonsense witch said, eyes narrowing down at him slightly as she plucked at something on her severe black robes.

“Actually,” Professor Snape interrupted, from behind – *great Morgana*, Antares thought, *I didn’t even hear that* – “he is adopted, so he really does not know. I came across the lad in Diagon Alley, Minerva – his mother,” Snape continued, a large black eyebrow raising mockingly, “works in one of the *shops*. Hardly anything to do with the Blacks, I should think.”

*Oh, thank goodness – if they’d asked me anything else, I’d probably have had to lie, and –*

“He doesn’t look *exactly* like one, I suppose,” a tall, stately looking woman with pale brown hair said slowly, taking one of the chairs that Antares now realised surrounded his smaller one. “Can we not get on with this? I’ve a huge project to rush through, all set out on the Tower, and no time for dilly-dallying.”

“And w-we all have our s-syllabi to f-finish for the m-meeting, of course,” a pale, nervous-looking man in a shabby turban said, sitting down opposite Antares with a sort of half-smile in his direction.

“Why do not you all introduce yourselves, so that we can start the tests?” Dumbledore remarked easily, making Antares stiffen again with anxiety – that was completely the last thing he wanted to *do* –

“My name is Professor McGonagall, Mr. Black,” the stern-looking witch said, adjusting her own glasses on the bridge of her nose. “I will be testing you practically in Transfiguration.”

“Charms practical for me,” Professor Flitwick said, winking kindly.

“Potions, as you already know,” Professor Snape said, looking boredly at the odd, heavily made black-and-gold watch on his wrist – something Antares had entertained himself along the way here for a

minute or two by imagining how he would filch it from the constantly alert Professor without him noticing –

“P-professor Q-q-quirrel,” the pale man said haltingly, nodding Antares’ way. “Defence Against the Dark Arts – even though the practical for that is a bit of a joke, seeing as you don’t need to start that until second year – ” Antares couldn’t help staring – surely that twitchy specimen couldn’t be *meant* to teach him how to defend himself. He could hardly stop stuttering, and looked very uncomfortable sitting next to Snape, for crying out loud –

“And that leaves me, I think,” the pale, tired-looking woman said hastily, jerking a little in her chair, a bit as if she’d been dozing off. “I am Professor Sinistra, and I teach Astronomy. Of course, as testing you practically in that *now* is impossible, I will simply oversee your written tests and verbally test you on History and Astronomy together, as our History Professor is visiting with his former family in the south of Spain.” Antares nodded at that, sympathising a little bit with her dim eyes and obvious lack of sleep – Bella had had to work two jobs at the same time, once. It had meant sleepless nights and enough tea to cancel out the meagre extra the second job paid, and his mother had looked simply *awful* throughout – a fact that he knew had really, really disgusted her.

“We need the money, Tares,” she’d say tiredly, but still have that oddly low look on her face as she caught sight of her dull hair in a mirror, a look that had spurred him on to his very first act of stealing –

“I suppose we’re doing the written tests first, then?” Antares ventured almost easily, shifting slightly in his seat. The woman – Sinistra perked up a very little, and nodded firmly as Professors Flitwick, McGonagall and Quirrel rose to leave the classroom, followed by a faintly smiling Headmaster Dumbledore. Antares tried not to be too relieved that Snape remained firmly, glaringly seated, but couldn’t bring himself to hold back the weak smile he directed at the man, who gave him a slightly confused sort of half-glare.

“Yes, we are. If you’d kindly take the seat behind this desk, Mr. Black...”

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Antares put down his much-abused quill with a sort of half-sigh, half-groan, not daring to look too closely at the parchment that swam before his frightened eyes. He'd understood some of the questions on the innocent-looking roll of parchment Professor Sinistra had yawningly summoned into being, but, as for the rest of them...

Bitter, frustrated tears stung at his tired eyes, making him reach for the quill again, just so he could squeeze it a bit more. He *had* to go over the bloody thing, he just *had* to – there had been some questions he'd missed, because he'd not been sure of the meaning of a word or two, but he was sure he could at least guess –

A soft chime from the hourglass on his desk sped up his nervous, slightly jerky movements as he realised he'd only a quarter of an hour left. For a whole minute, Antares couldn't move, couldn't *think* anything but that he'd failed, he'd missed his chance, and Mum, oh Mum would be so *disappointed*, and so strong about it, and how he really wanted to cry and snap the horrible Self-Inking quill into pieces and run away –

*Pull yourself together, Antares Black!* Antares jerked slightly. He could almost *hear* the hiss of Bella's cold voice in his ear. *Don't you dare give up – don't you dare shame the name you are given by snivelling your way out of something you need! You are a Black – you are talented, you are cunning, use it!*

Antares bit his lip, hard, and forced himself to re-roll the parchment so he was at the beginning again, and began to answer questions he'd passed by. When he didn't understand something, he guessed. When he did, he jotted down the shortest, most meaningful thing he could think of as an answer, and when he frankly did not know what the question was about, he added a short line of something he thought might relate to the few words he could understand in it. He didn't dare look up at Professor Snape, who had stopped absently pacing the classroom and was now definitely staring at him, or at the weary Professor Sinistra, who was stretching her arms with a look of longing that spoke of a bed and blankets and nothing to do but sleep.

*The twelve uses of dragon's blood – that's easy, that was Dumble-Dumble-something –*

A soft chime sounded again, twice in a row, and Antares shakily set down his quill and began to roll the parchment up with nervous, jerky movements of his rough fingers.

“Oh, don’t bother with that, lad – I’ll mark the test right here. If you’ll just hand the scroll to me and tidy up your desk, you can be off to lunch,” Professor Sinistra said, rising from her seat at the large teacher’s desk. “Severus? You won’t mind taking him down to the Great Hall, will yo- ”

“Of course, of course,” Professor Snape said, cutting the slightly surprised woman off. “However, I must speak to you of something, very quickly, before we depart – ” Sinistra nodded, curious, and Professor Snape made a sharp, angular movement with his wand, and when he began to speak, Antares realised what he’d done. A Silencing spell of some sort – it had to be, as he could sort of hear the muffled words, but could not understand what exactly they were.

*What does it matter, anyway?* Antares thought gloomily, none-too-carefully shoving unused rolls of parchment into his bag and clearing up the spots on the desk with a small cleaning spell without really thinking about anything in particular. Well, anything in particular that didn’t have to do with the fact that he was certainly going to *fail* –

“Antares – ” Snape called to him, startling him a little. “Professor Sinistra has a few questions for you, before we leave – ”

“Okay,” Antares said, instead of apologising for his truly horrible handwriting, or that he wasn’t sure whether he’d spent ‘the’ wrongly throughout the entire *thing* –

“Just a bonus or two,” Sinistra said, not unkindly, shuffling through her robes until she found a tattered-looking roll of parchment. She then proceeded to ask him twenty of the most unrelated questions he’d ever heard in his life – little things about goblin history and how the galleon system was set up and run, and why the Floo network went down from time to time. And, lastly, the creator of the Philosopher’s Stone, a question for which Antares had to rack his memory a little, before coming up with: “Oh, yeah, I remember – something to do with flame, or something. Right, Nicholas Flamel –

these two old wizards nearly had a brawl about his, er, merit, or something like that, and – ”

“That will do, Antares,” Snape said hastily, giving a – now that he thought to even *look* – a slightly amused Professor Sinistra a rather pointed look.

“I apologise for monopolising your time, Antares,” Sinistra said easily, extending a smooth palm within easy reach. Antares shook it lightly, hoping she wouldn’t notice the stupid burn on his left one – he’d picked it up last night, from being an idiot around the kitchen cauldron. “I sincerely hope you are up to our standards for apprenticeship. Good day, Severus.” And, with a nod, she’d left the classroom, rolls of parchment tucked under one arm, the other engaged in a wide, wholehearted yawn. Snape nodded to himself, looking approving for no reason Antares could possibly –

“Are you listening, boy? I said, follow me. It is easy to lose one’s way in this castle, and I have no intention of searching you out and missing the afternoon meal.” Antares hastily hoisted his bag onto his right shoulder and followed the swooping black cloak of Professor Snape, heart slightly lighter for the compliment Professor Sinistra had sort-of paid him. It counted that a Hogwarts Professor *hoped* you were up to standard, didn’t it?

Antares sighed as they turned yet another corner and were faced with stairs clearly on the move. He just hoped – he could just hope, and hope that hoping helped.

And, as he trotted half-heartedly after a muttering Professor Snape into the heavenly-smelling Great Hall, doing his very best and hoping seemed like a very, very good idea indeed.

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*A/N: Well, well well. Sorry about the cliffhanger, but I thought I wouldn’t fall into the pitfall of TSOTS Part the Third and make this chapter humungously long and leave myself nothing whatsoever to write from Bella’s and Severus’ POV, so here you guys go. I just thought I’d post this because I have the time, and y’all were waiting for an update, so...*

*As I said in my LJ, inspiration for this fic has, strangely, struck me like a moving train zipping through Gatwick Station on a cold winter day, complete with monstrously, fiendishly involved storyline and lots of rereading it and wishing I was done already. So perhaps I'll update this again before PTT – and perhaps not. I've a snippet or two written for the next chapter of that as well, so it could go either way.*

*Right, the next chapter will probably be from Bella's point of view, and will enable you to see a little more of the world Antares lives in, through her anxious eyes. It will involve preparations for Antares' journey to Hogwarts (which is already certain, so I'm not giving anything away here) and what exactly happened during the rest of Test Day, as well as an insight into what Bella does at Madam Malkin's. I do realise that this chapter probably creates more questions for you guys, but isn't that the spirit of mysterious AU's? I'll answer stuff not related to the plot if I can, so ask away. See you all soon!*



## **Chapter 5: Mournful Preparations**

Bella slipped silently into the room, hating herself. Hating herself for feeling like this – this tearing, empty feeling, this feeling of impending doom, impending loss, because her life simply *had* to be more than that thin frame and that messy, too-long hair and those dirty, talented hands sprawled this way and that on the covers. She shut the door carefully with a slow wave of her wand, eyes intent on Antares' shifting, mumbling form – he'd never slept very deeply, especially not in a strange bed – as she moved closer to the bed, eyes taking in his features with a painfully greedy delight.

She stiffened, averting her gaze as she sat slowly, softly, on the bed beside him. Emotion battered at her in pulsing, destructive waves, wearing down her will to let go, to let him go.

*Because he will go, she said fiercely to herself, threading tired hands into his dark hair, he will – and as an apprentice, too, despite everything that he faced there...* She smiled to herself, softly, remembering that odd moment of truth, when she heard his pounding, easy gait coming up the stairs and towards her tired, half-slumbering frame in this very room –

*“Muuuum,” he half-cried, half-whined, poking his – Bella rolled her eyes – messy head round the dark, worn wood of the door, cheeks flushed with excitement. “You’re not asleep, are you?” Bella sat up wearily, shaking her head. She knew that tone – it meant he’d tell her his news anyway, didn’t it, and –*

Oh, Morgana –

*The tests! Bella felt inhuman energy run through her limbs, driving her to sit up, sit up, as Antares practically tore into the small room, hair bursting haphazardly out of his ponytail as he jumped painfully onto her legs, whooping unintelligibly. She wrestled all five feet of wriggling, overexcited son off her aching legs, a grin spreading onto her face as they struggled briefly, Antares giving up and sagging peaceably into her arms, laughing like he’d not done for a long, long time.*

*"I got in," he said quietly, after she'd drawn him into her lap, like she'd done when he was younger and far less heavy. Bella branded his warm forehead with proud lips.*

*"I'm no fool, Antares. I know – I know..." Bella let go of him almost immediately, dragging herself from under the covers. "Where is Severus?"*

*"Downstairs staring into a bottle of Butterbeer, muttering somethin' 'bout 'twitchy brats'," Antares said scornfully, bouncing foolishly on the hard mattress. "You know what he's like." Bella nodded, unable to keep back an equally foolish smile – this meant so much to him, to both of them, with extra Galleons saved for things her lonely son wanted to steal but did not, with extra Sickles for a really good cloak for the winter that always hit them so hard. Bella summoned a threadbare hairbrush from the dresser – the same one she'd used on her twitchy, complaining son this very morning, in fact – and began to drag it through her hair. "Are you going down to see him?"*

*"And if I am?" Bella replied, giving him a challenging look. "Where else will I meet someone who'll actually tell me what happened during those blasted tests?"*

*"You only had to ask, Mum," Antares cried, tumbling messily off the bed and scrambling up to her, face still bright with hope and pure satisfaction. Bella rolled her eyes and grumbled, but allowed him to latch himself onto her arm as she descended the stairs, gabbling a mile a minute about how big Hogwarts was, and how many rooms, and how much food...*

Bella pressed tired fingers to her eyes, feeling foolish for the tears that sprang up to them. She'd known she'd miss his chatter, but not like this, not remembering the detailed description he'd given of the lunch he'd had and feeling oddly nostalgic, not –

"Bella? Are you – " Severus came striding awkwardly into the room, looming over her and the tossing Antares as usual. "Don't tell me you're *pining* for him already – "

"Be quiet," Bella remarked absently, brushing her roughened fingers over Antares' slightly furrowed brow. "He sleeps lightly – I don't want

to wake him again.” Cheeks reddening a little, she bent and pressed a kiss to her son’s forehead, not allowing herself to climb into the threadbare sheets beside him and tuck him in her arms, because sleeping fully dressed was always so uncomfortable, and –

And she might miss work tomorrow. And Severus was hovering in the doorway, looking oddly unnerved, approving and displeased all at once, in the way only he could.

So she rose from the bed, and slipped out as gently as she could, trying not to care that Severus’ dark eyes were on her as she carefully wiped her eyes on her way out. She’d meant to stay longer, but –

“Would you like some tea, Bella?” Severus’ quiet, overly polite enquiry startled her from her introspection, enough that she nodded without even looking at him, inwardly bemoaning her foolish manners and odd stiffness. There was no need to be impolite to him, simply because her brat son was disappearing off to Hogwarts tomorrow for more than three *months* –

It caught Bella completely by surprise when she felt herself crumple to the side of her chipped teacup, not sobbing, not *crying* like some vulgar witch.

*I am a Black*, she reminded herself, whispering hoarsely. *Blacks do not cry. They don’t*

It kept the tears at bay for a full five minutes, until Severus’ thin hand covered hers awkwardly, and the cursed things escaped. Bella kept her head down – she knew she did not cry well at *all*, not like Andromeda –

*Oh, Merlin, my sister, my blood – you and your child, flesh of your flesh. How much I envy you –*

Bella held on stubbornly to the thin hand that had been offered to her, heart collapsing in unto itself, chest tightening with something that was part panic, part aching, looming loss – something she hadn’t felt since that horrifyingly cold, desperate night that she’d invoked every last bit of her magic to keep Antares breathing, used her blood. The

emotions rose hot inside her chest for what seemed like an age, then cooled into the stubborn lump that had been in her throat for most of the day.

Then, and only then, did she let go of Severus' hand, almost hastily. Bella sat up slowly, wiping down her wet face, lined from the grooves in the table, studiously avoiding the penetrating gaze of the man across from her. He probably did not understand, but that did not matter. All Bella knew was that if she held his warm hand any longer, she would press cruel lips to it, and lean in to smell him, because he smelled a little like her son, and –

No. Not for him – not like that. She held back a sniff and absently rubbed at a slightly depressed line in her cheek, feeling miserable and not a little embarrassed.

"I suppose," Severus began, a little hesitantly, "he told you everything of the tests."

"Yes," Bella said lowly, creating a handkerchief wearily from the air before her. "Wasted two hours of my sleep, into the bargain." She paused for a long minute, then continued. "I never asked you what you thought, did I?"

"No." Bella nodded slowly, now venturing a taste of the cup of tea before her. No milk, enough sugar to kill a doxy – perfect. She let a half-smile play at her lips, asking Severus if he would tell her what he thought on the matter with her eyes as she took another long, slow sip of the tea.

He sighed, frustrated as always, but soon began. "The first thing that comes to mind, for me, is that he is – ah – *afraid*. Of whom is important, however – there is Hagrid – no real surprise there, the huge lout, and – oh, yes, Minerva McGonagall, and the Headmaster. Although, with him, it is more of a bemused sort of fear, as is usual with more unruly students. At least, I think so." Severus took a deep sip from his cup, face showing only a negligent amount of interest in their conversation as he put forth his opinion in that forthright, nearly insulting manner that was uniquely his. Bella stifled a small smile – he'd never really been one for a joke, especially if somehow at his expense – and listened on.

“The written exam went better than I supposed it would, actually.”

“Really?” Hope and embarrassment fought in her chest – how she wished she’d thought to *do* something about Antares’ awful skills –

“His penmanship is, of course, nearly illegible,” Severus said, shrugging with a sort of casual cruelty, “but he did understand far more of the questions than I expected him to. With some further intensive lessons and a little judicious humiliation from his peers, he should be perfectly literate in no time. Goodness knows some of the brats we get aren’t, even with a real wizarding education from home.” Another sip. “The practical tests, however – ”

“Oh, yes, he told me those went well,” Bella cut in, relief flooding her. Antares hadn’t been too clear on what had happened exactly, only to say that they’d made him summon things in the Charms. Severus fixed her with a direct look, tinged with grudging admiration.

“He performed extremely well. Even coaxed that twitchy bungler of a Quirrell into trying to teach him the Disarming Charm – then proceeded to perform it on his first try. And in Charms – Bella, why did you never think to tell me he could use Summoning Charms?” She gave him a sly smile.

“Well, now you know.” He rolled his eyes, setting down his cup with a decisive clink.

“You could have informed me, of course. I looked like a fool, gaping at him with the rest of them – ”

“You gaped? Really, Severus?” He glared at her, then went on, ignoring her question.

“Flitwick is probably already devising special NEWT coursework and research for the poor little fool even now.” Black eyes found hers again. “You should have told me, Bella. It was not wise in the least to reveal such a skill without cause – I could have warned him – ”

“It will be fine,” Bella replied, stroking a deep scratch on her cup’s saucer. “If I know anything about that boy, he stopped summoning things for Flitwick, or whoever, a long way before his potential.”

"I suppose the concept of preserving the secret of his strength may not be entirely alien to him, then," the dour man grudgingly conceded, downing the last of his tea. "He is talented, as you said, I'll give him that. What I am unsure of is if he has the sense to shape and cultivate that –"

"Did you know he partly convinced me to take up your offer of refuge, Severus?" Bella cut in, sighing a very little as she set down her half-empty cup. Finally, a chance to speak her mind –

"You cannot be – you are not serious." Short statements – colour in his cheeks – classic signs of a disbelieving Severus Snape. Bella found herself wanting to pinch those cheeks – even the slight flush in them was *pale*, really –

"Have I deceived you since we arrived, Severus?" Bella said, lowering her voice as she looked him in the eye, deliberately not thinking about how persuasive it had become. She *knew*, for goodness' sake, that she was fragile, and, at the moment, craved some kind of care to soothe her impending loss, but she would control this. All she needed to do was to make Severus let go of this view of his – that Antares was somehow not entirely sensible. It had nothing to do with herself. "I am entirely serious." He stared down at the table, jaw working silently as he scratched at the handle of his cup.

"What is it that you want from me, Bella?" Severus said quietly.

"I only ask," Bella replied, fighting the sudden, obviously foolish impulse to touch his cheek. This had *nothing* to do with her. This was for Antares – "that you show him the same...respect...that you do me, when he earns it."

"When he earns it," Severus repeated lowly after her. Odd – so odd that she looked up at him, and realised that he had lowered his eyes to her mouth, and even though he averted them easily, she found herself considering. That he was young for a teacher at Hogwarts, and could hardly liaison with, who was there, even – Madam Rosmerta, or –

“Yes.” *Oh dear, Bella-my-love*, she could hear the old, old voice of Madge Perkins cackling in her ear, as currents wove themselves through her skin. *Oh dearie me* –

And slowly, as if against its owner’s will, Bella could see Severus’ slightly damp hand settle on top of the table, almost casually, and did not know what to do. Unfortunately, her body knew, and reacted, and she watched her own damp hand settling on top of his, fingers trailing along his wiry wrist as she decided foolishly that his skin was warmer than it looked. She chanced a look, a sideways sort, in his direction, wondering what on earth was really happening. He looked like he was suppressing something, and even as she rose a little clumsily to hover behind him and sink her hands into the tense muscles of his shoulders, she knew it was a question. A Severus Snape without a question was almost unheard of, especially in this sort of situation –

“Bella – ”

“What?” She knew her tone was obdurate, that her voice had reached that seductive threshold that belonged to the Blacks and to them only, and she found she did not care. Not very much.

“I – ” Severus faltered, in a way that made a small smile wind itself into her lips. It must have been long for him, since – “This is – hmm. This is not wise.”

“You do not think I know that?” Bella replied, surprised at the impatient note on which she ended that sentence, her fingers seeking out the blushing, slightly greasy skin of his warm neck. “I know. Blacks are not wise – how many times have you told me that? Sneered that my way?” She worked slightly cool fingers beneath his collar, loosening it as she bent over him, to whisper in his ear. “Do you not wish to be unwise, sometimes?” If he was to refuse, now was the perfect time. Bella bit her bottom lip, keeping a safe distance from his flushed skin – he was stubborn, and she wondered if he would refuse –

*Are you actually hoping he says yes?* The remnant of Rodolphus’ voice seemed to sneer at her. *Greasy Severus Snape, above you in his greasy bed? How desperate you must* –

“Are you certain?” Severus’ voice was very sharp, sharp enough to cut, enough to make Bella’s fingers pause on his neck. “Because – this would change a lot of things. A lot.”

“Would it?” Bella replied, voice harsher than she intended. This wasn’t going the way she planned – he sounded as if he would say – and she wanted, *needed* someone large and warm and smelling of foul, pleasurable things beside her tonight, and possibly the next. Angry with disappointment and self-ridicule, she removed her hands from his neck.

His own thin hand seized firmly at her wrist, and she felt immeasurably better. “I suppose not,” he muttered, more to himself than to her, but it was enough.

Bella could not prevent a wry, triumphant smile rising to her lips as he roughly kissed her palm, anticipatory heat pooling down below.

They would have to be careful, that went without saying. But –

“Will you...? To my room...?”

Bella put her other hand into Severus’ collar, the triumphant smile widening as he rose, barely an inch taller than her, black gaze hungrily roaming her body.

Just because her son was leaving her for Hogwarts didn’t mean her life would be over.

Severus, she found a moment later, had an oddly nice mouth, and a way with those thin hands. And tall enough. He could Apparate here on weekends.

It would be possible, for at least a while.

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Bella woke up with a small jolt, wondering why she felt so – so *warm*. Antares was never –

A small shift and a manly groan erupted from beside her, even as a warm, wiry arm tightened around the – she blinked blearily – bare



skin of her waist. A quick feel told her she was naked below the thin sheets, and beside –

Oh dear.

Bella tried not to goggle too long at the slumbering mass on the bed beside her, all pale skin and interestingly defined back muscle under worn covers. And greasy hair – greasy pillow. She shifted, breathing slightly faster now. She hadn't been drunk last night – that didn't explain this – she'd *definitely* done this of her own accord. She ran a tired hand through her hair. She should have known this would happen – Bella had never really been able to manage her passions as best as she could, and now, just when she'd not been with male company for long, Severus had dangled before her, an obscure, but certainly tempting alternative. What was important was that Antares did not –

Oh.

All at once, the craving for warmth and the strong desire to cry hit her again. Her son – her only son, going away to Hogwarts. And Severus slumbering too peacefully beside her, the fruit of her selfish desperation. A sob escaped Bella without her even noticing it, and though she choked the rest of it down, it was enough.

"Bella...?" Warm pale muscle rolled around, muzzy black eyes alighting – still hungry – on her bare chest. "Ah." And, although Bella shook her head, to try to make him see she was just – "No – it is fine. I understand..." Severus gulped slightly, a pale, slightly trembling hand extending to her pained face for a moment as he looked at her from under low lashes. "Use my shower...? I'll see if that dratted boy is awake." And without even a real answer from her, he'd rolled absently out of the warm nest of sheets, summoning that threadbare blue dressing gown of his, but not before she got a good glimpse of pale skin, and half-hard –

Well.

Possibilities seemed to spin before her in the shower that morning, as Bella hastily completed her toilet only to stand, staring at her slightly lined face in the mirror. Most of the lines were from the pillow –

Severus really had the most horrible set – and the tired look was from Antares and his journey and the wearying day ahead of her at Madame Malkin's. But still –

Bella longed to throw something at the mirror, but did not. She dressed instead, taking care to do it in front of Severus when he returned briefly to find something or other, and felt fiercely purposeful and proud when he lingered confusedly. Unnecessarily.

She wanted to hit herself. Why did she suddenly want him, now? Because he'd rolled so easily out of her bed? Preposterous. Really.

*What is it with Blacks and difficult people?* Bella wondered absently, later at breakfast, as he and Antares sniped at each other almost companionably, though neither of them would ever admit it. *Even Antares – bless him – isn't the most tractable boy. Why do I do this to myself?*

Later, at the station, staring at the absolute red of the Hogwarts Express, bitter things fighting in her chest, Antares tugging heart-achingly on her sleeve, Severus being stiffly courteous (too courteous) to that Sinistra, Bella could not, for the life of her, understand why.

But, for now – for her *sanity* – she put it aside, and smiled down at Antares and combed proud, wistful fingers through his slightly too long hair, and let him hold her the way he'd favoured at least two years ago, winding thin arms around her middle and sinking his thin face into her side. And when she felt a familiar dark gaze on her, she allowed herself a single look, and a single wry, wistful smile.

Life, even the hard one she now had, was too short to worry and think on consequences.

The Hogwarts Express whistled and steamed off, carrying off the two of the few balancing influences in her life – one old, one new, and yet not so. And yet her heart was lighter than it should have been on her obscure return to Spinner's End, because she thought she'd seen Severus leave a note, in the bustle to be out of the ailing cottage.

And so he had. Bella settled before the small fire in his room with the unopened missive, feeling oddly content to leave it as it was. It was enough that he was certain to return.

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*A/N: Did y'all see that coming? I must admit, neither did I. Bella's a very determined character – not one to wait and pine and gaze at something she wants, no matter how badly or how little she wants it. I'll let you draw your own conclusions about what happened between her and Severus, and whether it will last or continue or whatever, and will (unfortunately evil grin) not be answering any questions on the issue. Mind you, that I say that means entirely NOTHING in the way of foreshadowing. It all depends on her.*

*And of course, since I was conflicted about uploading this chapter in the first place, I've got a second one following close behind it! Isn't that great? Get ready for Chapter 6: To Hogwarts He Goes. Plus some real acknowledgements to reviewers (nothing by the way of answers, because of the lovely new review-reply feature recently added) in the next.*

## **Chapter 5: To Hogwarts He goes**

Antares jolted awake with a start, hands scrabbling for something he muzzily decided should be his new wand. The dream he'd had – frightening, positively so – faded away into his itchy pillow, as they were wont to do when he woke up full instead of hungry. He stared up into the ceiling above him, swiping crusty stuff from his eyes until they hurt, feeling excited and *not*, all at the same time.

For one thing, Antares thought, as he swung himself out of the bed, he was going to *Hogwarts*, whether it was before all the other brats (as Professor Snape had said) arrived or not, and the idea of going back there gave him that warm, tingly feeling that had made him so giddy on the train back on the day of the apprenticeship tests that he'd annoyed Snape by being unable to sit still.

*But, on the other hand...*

Bella wouldn't be there. Just as she wasn't here, in their bed, this morning, as she should be.

Antares struggled not to let his shoulders droop as he felt his way into the bathroom, refusing to open his eyes because they hurt from being swiped at too much. If he'd really known how awkward leaving his mother behind would feel, maybe...

But no, no, *no*. Bella would *never* have stood for the idea of him not going away to Hogwarts, scholarship or no. Antares stepped uncaringly into the shower, the spray slicing through him like the cold expression in his mother's eyes sometimes could. She'd have sold herself to send him there – he knew that, sold the Black name and everything that came with it (which wasn't much), done *anything*. Hadn't she agreed to move into this place to keep him safe?

*Idiot, idiot, idiot*, Antares told himself sharply. *How can she come to Hogwarts with you, anyway? It's never done.*

But still –

"Boy! You'd better be awake – "

Snape's somewhat less greasy, unkempt head poked around the tiny bathroom door, which was slightly ajar. Colour flooded his pale face as a scowl of something resembling embarrassment passed across his features, before he slammed the door shut. Antares smirked to himself, a little wryly – the Professor was now so bloody particular about believing he was some sort of mad fool that would never do what he was told. So he'd conveniently forgotten to set aside some quills and parchment. So *what?* It was only because –

"You'd best be ready in half an hour, boy, the train leaves *precisely* at eleven. If your uselessness of habit causes us to miss that train, you will be unceasingly sorry." And with that, the shuffle of Snape's dressing slippers drifted through the door, and Antares knew he'd gone into his and Bella's room, probably to check for what would be the tenth time that week that Antares had packed everything he'd been told to.

Antares rolled his eyes – for all his odd, jerky generosity towards him and his mum, Severus Snape was very disbelieving of the fact that Antares was deserving of all the favours he'd slyly slipped into his life. It didn't make sense –

"Thank Merlin – all seems to be in order..." the mutter drifted through the ajar door that led into Bella and Antares' room. More bustling and shuffling of slippers could be heard as Antares turned off the shower with an awkward scrabble for his wand and a resulting set of wonky swishes that doused him with a stream of ice-cold water before the shower spray ceased to a mere trickle. "Your mother has commandeered my own bathroom, so I shall be ready to take you to King's Cross a little later than planned." Antares snorted to himself – of all the *nerve*, bellowing and hissing about him being late, and – "Please be sure to comb through that filthy mop you call *hair* – your mother shall have no time to do so for you this morning, as business at Madam Malkin's will be frantic today."

"I will," Antares settled for saying, trying not to bite too hard on his lip. Snape always treated him like he was *stupid* –

"Have you finished in the shower, boy?" And the greasy, irritable head was poking round the door again, black eyes uncomfortably

surveying Antares' thin, shabbily towelled body. Antares tried not to sneer in answer, but found it hard to keep his irritation and disgust from showing on his face. "Hmm. I see."

Snape stepped into the small bathroom abruptly, turning Antares around sharply, as if he was surveying him for some reason or other. After a bewildering examination that had the sour man peering into his eyes, the young boy could not hold back a derisive question –

"Look – if you were thinking to sell my pure young body off to vampires, getting me into Hogwarts was *hardly* the way to – "

"Don't be foolish, boy." Snape said, finally letting go of his slightly smarting arm, an odd look in his dark eyes. "Those burns – where did you acquire them?" The very tone of the question was insulting – as if Snape believed he'd set fire to himself, or something equally stupid, but the look on his face demanded an adequate answer.

"Always had 'em. Ever since I could remember, really," Antares offered grudgingly, fingers itching to go to his scalp. He settled for a hipbone instead, tugging the towel over his right one because Snape looked a little scandalised.

"Ah. Remind me at Hogwarts – I have a burn salve. It works in an evening, though unpleasant. Surely you don't want anyone else to see these," he gave Antares a pointed look, "scars of yours."

Antares shrugged – he'd never been very self-conscious, and it hardly mattered to him. If Professor Snape wanted to bathe him in burn salve for some silly huffy reason, he supposed he'd have to put up with it. After all, he could hardly say no when the esteemed Hogwarts professor had so obviously gotten him his scholarship and apprenticeship to the place –

"Right. Get out – I have some grooming to do." Antares did not hesitate to leave the bathroom, grabbing the comb as he did so with a sigh. He *hated* combing his hair.

---

An hour later, they were on Platform 9 and Three Quarters at King's Cross Station, and Antares had never looked at so many things in his

life. He found himself saying a shy ‘hi’ to a sleepy-looking Professor Sinistra, who actually smiled down at him, shaking back her fascinatingly long dark hair – a little longer than Mum’s – and picking tiredly at her shimmering robes. From the short, awkwardly polite exchange she and Snape had, she had been to a meeting of some kind of Guild of Astronomy, which had lasted into the early hours. The exchange was awkwardly polite because Bella stood a little way behind Severus, fidgeting in a way Antares remembered her doing at that first, tense meeting in Spinner’s End, and, after Professor Sinistra stiffly acknowledged her, staring dully at her hands, causing Antares to wonder if the glamor – or whatever the charm was called – had really, really worked.

Sinistra soon said a sleepy part-farewell and trundled off to a carriage, Severus trailing stiffly behind the professor and insisting to help her with her luggage as was only proper. And then Bella had bent over him and drawn him close and begun to stroke his hair, the way she had done the on his return on the day of the apprenticeship tests.

On that very first frightening day he’d seen her in the street, and she’d absently run her hands in his dirty hair, looking, in a way, just as lost as he had been.

“Mum – ” Antares found his voice cracking horribly as he tugged, a little desperately, on her sleeve. Bella took hold of his hand with her other one, still combing through his hair with her fingers.

“Ssh. No need to say a thing, Tares – you know this isn’t goodbye. Not exactly.”

“But mum – ”

“No – I won’t hear it. You’ll write to me, understand? I don’t care how you do it, or how your letters look. How they are smudged.” Tears seemed to seep into her voice, making his own throat close and open horribly. “Promise me, Antares.”

“I promise, mum.” The words came out muffled, because he’d buried his face in her side. It was amazing that she would let him show such – *weakness*, even on the near-empty platform, but he didn’t question it, simply breathing in her familiar, sweaty, sharp smell and absorbing

the movements of her rough hands in his hair until she gently disengaged his arms from about her middle. "I won't disgrace – um – the name – "

"I know you won't," she assured him, a small, proud smile on her lips, brushing hair away from his face. "If you need me, all you need to do is ask Severus – *discreetly*, mind, but ask him nevertheless." Suddenly she was on her knees, pressing a hot, affectionate kiss to his forehead that made rebellious tears itch at his eyes, and – "I await your owl, Mr. Black."

Antares nodded, a shy smile on his face at her mockingly formal tone of voice, and all too soon, the train was whistling almost impatiently, and only another hasty kiss served as their goodbye before Severus Snape hustled him onto the train, scowling all over his big-nosed face. Bella looked very wistful as he waved goodbye, but did not move even as her proud figure grew smaller and smaller, and Antares felt sure she could no longer see him.

Then they'd rounded a corner, and Snape was hustling him through the compartments of the largely empty train, muttering something about 'suitable company'. Finally, they approached a compartment that sounded with the laughs of boys, and the determined look on the tall professor's face assured Antares of what he'd only guessed before.

"I will check on you but once on this journey, boy," he said stiffly, quietly preventing Antares' slightly shaking hand from opening the door. "Be sure to behave yourself – the boys within that carriage are both Slytherins, and will do you no injury if you simply keep to yourself and keep your mouth shut."

"What if they hex me?" Antares demanded stubbornly, refusing to enter the compartment. Snape sighed, rolling his eyes.

"I assume you will know what to do in such a case. Hit them or hex them back, if you must." And with that, Snape was gone. The only thing that stopped Antares from cursing him out loud as he and his black robes swooped out of sight through the door on the other side of the tiny corridor was the discovery that his trunk had had some sort of lightening charm put on it. So Antares hefted it with one hand,



somehow balancing his wand in the other, and, after a brief struggle with the door handle, got the cumbersome door open, and stepped into the other compartment.

The curious, slightly mocking stares of two older boys met him.

“Who are you?” the smaller, thinner-looking one said suspiciously. “And what the hell are you doing here on the Express a day early?”

“I’m a new apprentice,” Antares said, as coolly as he could, shutting the door and pretending to heave his trunk (as it wasn’t really that heavy) into the one of the empty racks of the compartment. “I don’t know why they asked me a day early.”

“Name?” the bigger, more menacing one said, looking him up and down. “You can’t have a house yet, if you’re new.”

“Antares Black.” Both boys’ eyes widened quite a bit, and they exchanged a glance as he sat down opposite them, jamming his wand partway into the crevice beside his seat as insolently as he could. They would ask – he couldn’t afford to look like it mattered.

It turned out that he was wrong. “Antares, eh?” the bigger one said, sneering. “Nice name, that.”

“Tell me yours, then, if it’s so much better,” Antares returned, a little shakily. Both of the boys were at least a year older than him, and probably knew way much more magic than he’d even *heard* of – he didn’t fancy his chances if this little meeting went wrong, even if they didn’t care about his name, or ask yet. But the skinnier one laughed, and leaned over, holding out a slightly grubby, worn-looking hand.

“Adrian Pucey – he’s Charles Warrington the Fifth, can’t blame him for sneering at your name. It’s what Warringtons do, see...” his marginally friendly voice trailed off at Antares’ refusal to move, and he raised an eyebrow. “Too scared to shake my hand?”

“Be stupid to shake the hand of someone older who’s friends with some bloke who just made fun of my name, wouldn’t it?” Antares said sarcastically, jutting out his chin, feeling sweat spring up on his palms. This was so pointless – they could so obviously torture him, and

Snape would be at the other end of the bloody train, drinking Butterbeer with Sinistra and scowling at his bloody bottle –

A sly grin slid onto Adrian's face as he leant back into his chair, tucking his hands behind his head, giving a sceptical-looking Charles a pointed look.

"What did I tell you, eh Charlie? Knew he was Slytherin from the moment I saw him – "

"Yeah right – you *always* say they're Slytherin – "

"But I'm always right when they are, aren't I?"

"I didn't see you at Hogwarts," Antares said suspiciously, crossing his arms. "What day were you there?"

"Twenty-third, I think. Was a Friday, I'm sure of it – saw you in the corridors, but I don't think you saw me," Adrian said matter-of-factly, reopening the slightly grubby book he'd been looking into when Antares had come in.

"Obviously," Antares muttered, fidgeting when Charles – or Charlie didn't pay him attention, digging out a similar book. "Er – what are you reading?" He asked an absorbed Adrian, a bit desperately, though he knew he'd probably be unable to really –

"My old copy of Quidditch through the Ages," Adrian said, looking up at him with a little surprise. "Don't you recognise it?"

"Sort of, yeah." Antares said simply, getting up and moving over to take a look. Well, now that he looked closer, he *did* know the book, even if only sort of sketchily by sight. He'd never bothered to hang around the Quidditch Store on Diagon, of course – the clerks hated him for trying to snitch a Snitch years back, when he'd been relatively new to the Alley, and one had caught his eye.

"Are you trying to say you don't know what Quidditch is? Because if you knew – "

"I do," Antares cut in, peering at a blindingly illustrated picture of the Chudley Cannons. "Well, enough to know they're crap, yeah."

"Yeah," Adrian said, nodding grudgingly as he turned the page. "Team?"

"I Wander."

"Well, fuck me," Warrington said, sitting up with an excited look on his face. "A fellow Wanderer, eh, Adrian? You Magpies don't get *everyone* – "

" – but we do get *everything* – "

A heated Quidditch discussion – well, more like three boys shouting excitedly at each other – rapidly ensued, and the time passed quicker for that, for only ten minutes after an old witch came round with a snack trolley, Snape showed up, looking rather more bored than anything else, giving the chocolate-covered (well, not *covered*, only on his hands, and on one ear, if you were particular. Which Snape was) Antares a stern look when he remained defiantly in his seat.

"Warrington – Pucey," Snape nodded to each of them shortly, eyes snaking over to Antares' admittedly lopsided trunk in the rack beside him. "I see you've taken to Mr. Black."

"Yes sir – he's a dead cert for Slytherin, sir. Did you know?" Adrian piped up, just this side of respectful.

"As I was one of those that vouched for his apprenticeship, I would say I have quite a clear picture of his abilities, Mr. Pucey," Snape drawled insultingly, making Antares' ears burn, and his mouth tingle and desperately wish to roll off the 'Black equals Slytherin' truism, but knowing (and resenting) that he could not. "We shall see. Good day, Mr. Black." He disappeared once more, leaving Antares a seething ball of determination.

"He actually seems to like you, you know," Warrington remarked, delicately unwrapping another Chocolate Frog from the stash he'd splurged on. "That's odd – for him."

“Yeah,” Antares said resentfully, trying to keep back the – “Morgana, his nose – big enough for a bat to swoop up.” Adrian snorted, looking slightly guilty, as did Charlie, a nasty grin all over his larger face.

“Funny you’d say that,” he said, mercilessly tearing the head off his unwrapped frog, “everyone – and I mean *everyone* says he looks like a bat, in that cloak.”

“Vampire bat, to be precise,” Adrian added sagely. Antares snorted, speaking without thinking, his mind still angrily revolving around the issue of his future House.

“Him? A Vampire? For starters, he’s got waaay too much colour,” he said, biting uncaringly into a Cauldron Cake as he reeled off the bits and pieces of descriptions he’d heard all over Knockturn. “And he’s not edgy in sunlight – they always are, even with their fancy protective potion. They’ll be sniffing and shifting a bit, you know, not necessarily staring at necks or whatever, just looking really uncomfortable. That’s how you spot ‘em, isn’t it?”

“Ye-wha’?” Both boys goggled at him, but Adrian was the one to speak – or mumble, first. Antares was too absorbed in insulting Snape in his mind to care – the stupid bastard, telling him he didn’t –

“Are you trying to tell us you know how to spot Vampires, Antares Black? Come *on*, you’re a bloody kid – ” Antares jolted a bit to attention – that was Charlie now, giving him a scornful, patronising look he really didn’t like –

“Shorter than my kid sister – ” Adrian added, rolling his eyes.

“So?” Antares said, suddenly realising he’d made a mistake by saying anything. “You see them all the time on Knockturn – well, not *all* the time, but I’ve definitely seen at least two – ”

“You’re fibbing so much you’ll need a new tongue at Hogwarts,” Adrian said nastily. “Let it go, Charlie, he’s just trying to – ”

“No, no,” Charlie said, setting down the half-finished, wriggling Chocolate Frog without a thought, making Antares want to wince – he’d *paid* for that, and it was wriggling on the floor now – “I *definitely*

want to hear this, Adrian. See I've been on Knockturn Alley, so I'll know if he's – ”

“There's an inn,” Antares cut in shortly, wanting to dig himself out of this bloody hole as fast as he possibly could, “Dragon's Breath – run by this half-Troll, Emmett. Said inn is where the Vampires go when they're on Knockturn before dark, because it's dark in Dragon's Breath.”

“What branch of Knockturn?” Charlie asked, waving down Adrian's objections.

“Longer branch. It figures – the beggars never go down there. The beggars tell *me* never to go down there, and so does my mum – ”

“Then how the hell do you know for sure that Vampires go down Dragon's Breath, eh? Riddle me that,” Charles said, leaning back and looking satisfied that he'd finally –

“I went. Worst day of my bloody life.”

“Why aren't you a Vampire, then?”

“Only one was at the back of the pub, see. You *know* when you see them, you just do. Nearly raced my legs off getting out – I was really, really lucky.” Charles and Adrian snorted nearly in unison, but Antares could practically *feel* the belief seeping reluctantly off them. “You don't believe me, fine. But I held down three weeks of never going out and some nasty punishment for *that* from my mum, and I'm not likely to forget it happened, really.”

*Morgana, I've really got to learn how to watch my stupid tongue –*

“Whatever,” Adrian said finally, peering out the window, brown hair falling into his eyes as he did so. “We'll be there in a bit, I think – best change soon...” Charles grunted noncommittally, but got up and began to fish around in a very handsome-looking trunk above Antares' own.

Truly, some fifteen minutes later, a bodiless voice announced that they were approaching Hogwarts, and various other dry

announcements that would certainly culminate in a rather boring night for the three boys. Antares tried not to notice the difference between the other boys' relatively new robes and his own, fiercely telling himself that he'd just act like it didn't matter to him, and if it mattered to them –

The train stopped, and as Antares unloaded his things and looked round the unfamiliar, equally empty platform in disorientation, Adrian began to speak in his offhand, slightly jerky manner.

"Pity you're not coming in on the real train – they do this huge thing for the first years and everything, taking them over the lake and all that. But you'll've come in to do your tests, so I suppose it doesn't really mean much for you, does it?"

"Er – not really – " Antares said, uncertainly, wondering why they were still talking to him, after the looks they'd given his shabby robes. But Charlie was already asking him –

"Who've you met so far? Apart from Professor Snape, I mean."

"The Headmaster," Antares said bravely, avoiding having to pronounce the dratted old man's name and embarrass himself in this nervous state, "and a bird of his, I think. Oh, and Flitwick – the tiny man, and McGonagall. And – that stuttering teacher, Quirrell. Is he *really* teaching us Defence? 'Cos he doesn't – "

"Yeah, he's actually a bit on the useless side, Quirrell," Adrian said morosely, as Professor Snape bore down on them, having helped a considerably more perky-looking Professor Sinistra off the train. "Dunno what happened with him – he was all right till he took that trip somewhere. Albania or something."

"And he was never the same again," Charles said lowly, making his voice sound more deep and menacing than usual. "What did the lowly Quirrell meet in those forests? A set of disengaged hags' teeth? A bunch of Augury feathers? A broomstick gone wild? We shall never know..." By the time they'd been reached by a frowning Professor Snape, all three boys were laughing hard, Antares imagining Quirrell fleeing some persistent kind of animated piece of furniture.

And it wasn't until after a subdued supper in Snape's dungeon office and a heated, one-sided affair where Adrian and Charlie begged Professor Snape to let Antares sleep in their dorm – "Just once – honestly, if he doesn't make Slytherin tomorrow, there's always Obliviation..." – because it didn't make sense to send him up two flights of stairs to the spare bedrooms in the castle. After tersely Flooing the Headmaster, Snape grudgingly agreed, and the two overexcited boys manoeuvred a slightly overwhelmed Antares into their grand, wood-and-silver dorm hidden in the dungeons below.

That night, he dreamt blissfully of what was to come, little knowing how ill his future career at Hogwarts would fit his relaxed, untroubled expectations. Namely, to fit in, buckle down, maybe play some Quidditch, and make some friends.

And – he smiled sleepily to himself – steal one or two things, just for the fun of it. Yes. Hogwarts, so far, looked very good indeed.

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*A/N: Well, well, well! Look what we've got here – a wee bit of a short chapter. I'm intending to upload this at the same time as the next one, so there's not so much of a wait, as I obviously have lots of time to kill this weekend.*

*YE EDIT: Just decided not to keep you all in suspense after uploading Chapter 5. I'll see if I can grind out one more by the end of the weekend (before my exams, oh noes), so no worries on that score.*

## **Chapter 7: Important Instruction**

Severus tossed and turned in his – *empty, don't forget that* – bed, cursing himself. This always happened to him without fail after a – a liason.

No, he couldn't call it that.

An affair? An indiscretion? A wandering –

*Don't be disgusting, Severus.*

Bella hadn't said that last night, when he'd so foolhardily set his hand on the table in an awkward, clumsy gesture of approval of her perceived advances. Did that mean anything? Had she only used him to comfort herself for the loss of her irritatingly smart, mouthy brat, who was sleeping all too close by in the Slytherin dorms, perhaps being molested by the overly eager Pucey and Warrington, who had begged for his company that night?

Severus turned over with a wry chuckle. Bella would definitely skin him if anything of the sort happened – the whole idea was ludicrous, as that Adrian Pucey was still largely blind to the advances of – of Morwenna? Morwenna something, in his year, as well as the stupidly admiring stares he received from half the female students under thirteen in Slytherin, and Warrington was not much better. And besides, Bella would hunt him down and skin him – and perhaps tell him their arrangement was to cease...

...not that it had really *begun*, mind you.

Severus glared at the pillow he could barely see beneath him, the smell nauseating him. He'd forced himself not to hide last night, forced himself to be careless with his sadly thin, obviously ugly body, and not to even *think* of mentioning his hair, which had been – he winced slightly, in remembrance – in its usual state.

That was not to say that Bella had said a thing herself – she'd been thinner than he'd supposed. Rather a lot thinner, but her figure had still been somewhat attractive.



Fine, any specimen of the supposedly fairer sex would probably have looked attractive in dim lighting next to his aroused, painfully denied body. What of it?

*If she says no, the answer to that is what you suspected. She was desperate, plain and simple, and you were the only male body she could trust within reach, to be discreet –*

Severus sat up, knuckling wearily at his eyes. He couldn't afford to dwell on this now, to dwell on the absolute stupidity of leaving behind that note, couldn't afford to feel desperately like Flooing back to Spinner's End even more than was usual at the start of term. Could certainly *not* afford to let himself wonder if she'd be at home, waiting in that thing that she pretended was some sort of nightgown, black hair down over her shoulders, flexing slightly scarred feet in his slippers as she sipped tea and gave him that look she'd given him in the kitchen in those shockingly heated moments of tension. It would only mean that he wouldn't be able to sleep, really –

"Blast it all!"

He summoned the well-used bottle of sleeping potion beside his bed and shakily allotted himself the usual portion, grimly knocking back the tasteless Dreamless Sleep potion and settling himself back onto the covers without any ado.

He could not afford not to sleep, just because the bed didn't feel warm enough.

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Severus cursed brokenly as he tottered out of bed, still woozy from the overdose he must have given himself the night before in his haste to drive all thoughts of Bella and her older, out-of-bounds body between his covers. Thankfully he'd been spared dreams –

*Merlin, I'm late –*

He pressed his face into his hands in an agony of muzzy frustration, then loped rapidly for the toilet. A blindingly fast shower helped to take off a bit of the edge of the drowsy feeling, but he fumbled increasingly with his buttons as he tried to get into his irritatingly

obstinate robes and underclothes. Slurring furious curses at the offending trousers – *twenty FUCKING BUTTONS, why why why* – and shirt, he ransacked his plain wardrobe, seizing gratefully at a more traditional tunic, with *no buttons*. Throwing that on in addition to some loose trousers, he ventured a look at himself in the mirror and muttered a hasty cleansing spell in the direction of his still-greasy hair, inwardly promising he'd take care of it before he saw Bella next, not that he was really hoping to or anything.

Really.

Breakfast turned out to be a washout – no one and nothing seemed to be in the usually marginally full Great Hall, which was odd. There were gold plates on the small round table in the Hall that usually replaced the larger house tables during the summer, and it really seemed as if no one had been there. Feeling puzzled, angry and sleepy all at once, Severus summoned a house elf, only to find out:

“Please, sir, Professor Snape, we is not finishing the breakfast yet, sir – Snort is being needed in the kitchen! It is so early to be calling, sir – Snort trusts there is no problem?” At the disgusted Professor's groan of self-reproach (and rage against his incorrect clock), Snort became very distressed, and very nearly cried when Severus practically shouted the foolish creature away from him.

“No, no, NO – I DO NOT HAVE LIVER-ROT, YOU FOOLISH CREATURE! GET AWAY – AWAY – ”

Whereupon the rather surprised-looking countenance of Albus Dumbledore appeared behind him, looking rather disapproving (and also rather sleepy).

“Why, good morning, Severus – is anything the matter?” Severus slumped into his chair, groaning slightly.

“Headmaster – do forgive me, I had an unsettled night. This is nothing but the fruit of the paranoid struggles of a man awake far too early. I assure you,” he swiped gracelessly at his eyes, “ that everything is in order. Are you here for breakfast?”

“No, no – just decided to find out what was causing the racket. Are you staying?” Severus nodded slowly, feeling resigned. Goodness knows what couldn’t bloody *wait* one or two hours of well-deserved sleep – “I trust that the train journey from London was satisfactory?”

“Pardon me, Albus,” Severus got out, through gritted teeth, “but I would *greatly* appreciate it if you could skip the formalities this morning. If you wish to know whether young Mr. Black shall now be following in the portentous footsteps of his murdering uncle, please ask me directly.” The Headmaster merely gave him a calm look and sat down beside him slowly, almost as if he’d not heard the rude outburst. Severus cursed himself for twitching in that slight fear that had never really gone away as those blue eyes turned on him once more, the customary twinkle entirely gone.

“Ollivander contacted me,” Albus said slowly, his voice low enough that no other enterprising professor could possibly listen in from the cover the just ajar doors of the Great Hall could provide them. “I asked him to do so, should a wand with a certain core be sold, and, not three days before young Mr. Black’s apprenticeship tests – ”

“ – Mr. Ollivander contacted you to inform you that the dratted wand was sold to young Mr. Lupin. Honestly, Headmaster, if there is nothing else – ” Severus began to rise shakily to his feet, but was prevented from doing so by a hard look from the Headmaster, at which he slumped back into the chair, knuckling at his eyes.

But Albus Dumbledore just kept on *looking* at him, as if he expected him to draw some foolish conclusion – surely whatever special little wand Ollivander the Moony-Eyed had produced had gone to that dozy Neville Lupin, and not –

Ah. Severus’ brow creased disgustedly – still, it was such a long shot that it was foolish. Antares had not been the only person to purchase a wand that day, and yet, the look in Albus’ eyes seemed to say, *think again*.

“Albus,” Severus began, slowly, “I really do not understand what the Black boy’s wand could have to do with the situation – ”

“Then you are wrong, Severus. That wand is imbued with the second feather – you know of which one I speak,” Albus cut in, voice going stern. Severus stiffened with recognition and – and yes, *fear*, shrinking slightly back into his chair. The one of which he spoke, that had to be – “Why it went to him, I do not know – ”

“Could you even *consider*,” Severus hissed back, an old anger bubbling under his skin to join the fear and worry, “that he was worthy of the wand? Of the feather? But of course not – he is a Black, and likely to be a Slytherin, and not the Boy Who Lived, so of *course* he cannot have such a prized feather in his – ”

“Think, Severus,” Albus ordered, sitting straight in his chair, “think, but for a *moment*, what could happen to the boy if the secret of the wands is discovered. Do you think him beyond temptation, at such a young age? He is poor, unloved, unliked by his peers – ”

“He hasn’t even been *Sorted* yet, Albus!” Just because Dumbledore would probably be right didn’t mean Severus had to agree with him out loud. And Antares had easily befriended Pucey and Warrington, the second a notoriously difficult boy to fascinate or impress. Surely, that must be a sign –

“Nevertheless, he is a thief, and poor, and his blood is most certainly impure,” Albus put forth firmly, eyes boring into Severus’ worried black ones. “Do *you* think Slytherin would welcome and revere him? He’ll have a hard year ahead of him, if my suppositions are correct, you know that. If he should be tempted – ”

“He would never ally himself with those who hurt his mother, Albus – ”

“And if Tom promises him Bellatrix will be kept safe? Unhurt?”

Severus’ teeth seemed to grit of their own accord – if only because of the wrongness of the thought of seeing that Mark on that boy’s arm, older or not, seeing the dark confidence on his face, knowing Bella would be completely at the Dark Lord’s mercy –

Guilt surged through him momentarily as he realised he was speaking already, that *that* had jerked him into reacting to that awful statement –

“The boy knows what happened to his mother when she left the Dark Lord’s service against her will, Albus,” he said urgently, eyes locking on to that of the Headmaster even as his mind hissed at him that he was a selfish, deprived and ultimately useless shell of a wizard, “Your points have merit, but if he is – ”

“He will be a Slytherin, Severus. He will learn that sacrifices must be made, that one must trade one bad result for a worse one – if he does not know that already,” Albus returned, settling back into his chair, blue eyes implacable. “Such a situation would be easily dealt with, if it merely depended on logic.”

“Albus – but *why* are you raising these points, and now? You know I will do my best to – ”

“Doing your best may not be enough, Severus,” Albus cut in sharply, eyes narrowing at him. “The boy’s origins, his life so far – it was already unlikely that he was found by Bellatrix, and is even more so that he received that wand. If he goes down the wrong path, and Voldemort is present to usher him further along it, well...”

“He is *dead*,” Severus whispered fiercely, ignoring the cruel, traitorous thoughts that whispered of ugly rumours and that mark that had not *quite* faded away – “The Dark Lord is *dead*. Rest assured, Headmaster, that if Antares Black tries to take his place, you will be the first to know.” And, with that, he was up and out of the chair, ignoring the first few stragglers that had entered the Great Hall in his quest to get away.

He could have breakfast in his bloody room, for crying out loud – no need to sit around listening to a batty old fool permanently on his fucking guard –

An oddly quiet sort of scream stopped him in his tracks for a moment, causing him to pause before continuing on his way through the dungeons, wondering what on earth could have –

“Let me go – ” Someone young was sobbing – something scuffled just before him –

“You liar – ” *The Bloody Baron* –

Severus sped up, wand in hand, wondering what on earth had disturbed the irritating ghost *now*, and came upon a scene that seemed to somehow drive home the essential point of all Albus' wrangling mere moments before. There was a shivering lump of black robes on the floor, wretched enough to belong to only one student he could think of that was currently inside the castle. Above and around the lump was the debilitating, angry and extremely large, silvery presence of the Baron, who, judging by his side and almost solid appearance, must be in a towering fury.

"The chastisement of students is not your responsibility, Baron. Stand down immediately," Severus ordered, his tone loud and cold, wand languidly at his side as he slowed his steps towards the shivering lump that was Antares Black.

"He is a *liar*," the Bloody Baron snarled, turning his gaunt, silvery face Severus' way, eyes narrowed, but – a good sign – already beginning to shrink. "He dares to besmirch the name of Black once again – only a half-blood – absolutely *preposterous* – "

"Stand down, Baron," Severus ordered again, raising his wand just enough to let the parsimonious ghost know who exactly was in charge here. Antares was not moving an inch now, and Severus could see his pale hands were curled into shaking fists. "Stand down, *now*."

"I will not have him in this house, Severus!" the Baron said now, sounding slightly hysterical. "He is *not worthy of Slytherin* – "

"You can either stand down or be made to do so, Baron," Severus forced out, through gritted teeth, heart sinking. Was this what the Hat would say? What the boy's yearmates would think? "I am not in the habit of repeating myself, you foul thing, and especially not to the undead! For the last time – "

"A curse upon you!" the Bloody Baron screeched back, even as all the splattered silvery blood on the walls seemed to slither back onto him – some over Antares, poor little fool – and his quivering insubstantial form diminished back to its proper size.

Severus said nothing, but kept his wand trained on the cursing, throatily wheezing ghost as it drifted by, angrily darting through a wall just inches away from his face. As soon as the last tendrils of the Bloody Baron's cloak disappeared, however, his so far inactive wand was up and casting a warming charm in the shivering boy's direction, and his legs were carrying him quickly to Antares' side.

"What on earth did you *do*, you stupid child?" were the first words that found their way out of his mouth despite the somewhat uncomfortable, sharp shards of compassion twisting within his heart. Antares shivered a little harder – perhaps meaning to shake his head in response, but failing heartily in the execution – and mumbled something that sounded utterly pathetic. "I do hope this is not how you wish to pass your breakfast every morning here at future – would become very, *very* annoying if it con- oh, stop snivelling – " Severus flicked out a starched handkerchief and set it resolutely in the boy's shaking hands, determined not to demean himself further by actually embracing the little fool, who was now struggling to his feet. "Were you even on your way to breakfast?" Severus further inquired, steering the shaking boy in the direction of his office, quite far away from the deranged Baron, who would certainly be unfit company for him for rather a long time.

"I was," Antares replied doggedly, through teeth that had to be gritted from fear, not anger. "And then that – that *thing* came through the wall, and – "

"Don't even think of telling me you've never met a ghost before, boy, because – "

"I'm not saying I haven't!" came the indignant, slightly sniffly cry in return. Severus rolled his eyes, feeling his heart rate slow down just a touch. If Antares was being indignant already, then surely he couldn't have taken as big a fright as he looked to have just a moment before. "I'm not..." A look down to his side assured Severus that the boy *had* taken as big a fright as he'd originally thought. The sniffing, near-hysterical claim just then didn't help matters, either.

"This way – for goodness' sake, follow me – "

“But the Great Hall’s the other way,” Antares insisted vehemently, eyes darting around them as if a thousand Bloody Barons lurked in the corridors that the Potions Professor knew to be haunted only by a few rats. “You said I should go to breakfast, and – ”

“You are quite mistaken,” Severus said, stopping abruptly, voice a little rougher, perhaps, than it should have been. “I only warned you against the consequences of your spending your breakfast in this ridiculous manner in the future, *and* wondered aloud if you even set out to eat in the first place. I never intimated that we would be going to breakfast at all – oh, *Merlin* – ”

Severus’ rather angry little speech was cut short by the way the boy beside him seemed to wilt for a moment, the fright, oddly incongruous with the vaguely familiar lines of that face, coinciding neatly with the appearance of a rather sleepy-looking (but obviously not sleepy-looking enough) Peeves, who, delighted at his seemingly captive audience, proceeded to let out a series of ear-splitting shrieks that did entirely no good at all.

That is to say, Antares’ robes began to glow a sickly green with suppressed magic, and Severus could not remember ejecting Peeves from anywhere faster.

Once the new and somewhat alarming trial was past, Severus thought to ask Antares just one more thing.

“Where on *earth* are the other two? Warrington and – and Pucey, I think? I believe – ”

“Didn’t want to wake them,” Antares volunteered shakily, looking a little more sullen than before. “Didn’t know there were lunatic ghosts all over the place – ”

“And I didn’t know you’d go shooting your wide little mouth off to such an easily offended ghost as the Bloody Baron about your supposed heritage – ”

“It wasn’t like that! He just said he recognised me, and I sort of said my last name was Black, and he just went loony on me – ”



“Oh all *right* – ” Severus sallied forth, seizing the irritatingly contrite boy by the arm and tugging him after him through familiar turns in the dungeons. “I have plenty to say to you, nevertheless, and it might as well be said now, where no one – ” He opened the door to the nearest classroom, as he simply did not have the time or energy to go on wandering the dungeons, brat in tow, and gave Antares a none-too-gentle push – “ – can overhear us. Sit down.”

Antares sat down, oddly obedient, in the indicated chair, which was directly opposite the large desk at the head of the classroom. *The sixth years’ classroom*, Severus mused, for a moment, *if I remember correctly...*

“You know, of course, that you cannot reveal the true history of your name,” he began abruptly, leaning carelessly back against the large desk, intentionally looming over Antares as much as was possible as he did so. The boy rolled his eyes, gamely trying to hide a snuffle, but Severus kept on – this was important, whether he knew it or not – “So have you decided on an appropriate background? Before you answer, think it over. Is it verifiable when placed beside your real history as a Black? If not – ”

“Look,” the boy cut in rudely, “everyone’s going to assume I’m some relation to Sirius Black. It’s easy to get around – I’ll just be vague, and say no if I have to, ‘cos when it comes down to it, he was cast out of the family and I’m *not* related to him in that sense. And about my parents – I’ll just say I’m adopted, and my adoptive mum’s a witch, and she raised me by herself. No idea who my real parents are, lived in an orphanage for a while, la di dah, la di dah. Checks out, doesn’t it?”

Severus glared at him, but felt forced to nod his head in assent. It was a simple cover, and a solid one, to be honest, but it was just so *galling* to be interrupted when –

“Is there anything else?” the impertinent young voice sniffed as its bleary-eyed owner twitched in his seat. “I’m a bit hungry, so – ”

“If you want to eat alone with the Headmaster, you may go immediately,” Severus cut in, letting a vicious little smile rise to his lips. Antares blanched noticeably – *aha, not quite gotten rid of that*

*fear yet* – and he was content. “Well then. I was speaking of your vague descent – what will you do when people require stories of your life, or other such nonsense?”

“Tell them the truth glossed over,” Antares said, through gritted teeth. “Really, do you think I’m – ”

“Just making *sure*,” Severus said viciously, mind racing. The hardest thing about the dire conversation he’d just had with Albus was knowing *what to do*, apart from making sure the boy didn’t fall into the wrong company, or – but really, what was there to guard against? If such an unsavoury ghost as the Bloody Baron took an immediate (and admittedly rather spurious) dislike towards him, there surely must be some promise.

Ah, and in that case –

“Next time, if anyone, ghost or not, should give you trouble, your efforts would be better served in *standing up* to them, and not quivering on the ground, waiting for rescue. In short, attack first, ask questions later.” Antares’ eyes narrowed – *good* – and he, for a brief moment, stayed entirely silent when Severus began to teach him a simple spell for warding off ghosts. Then, as he’d hoped, the boy’s natural curiosity spurred him on to grudgingly wave his wand in the loops required, and even repeat the spell to himself quietly as Severus regained his seat.

Of course, as with any headstrong little fool, such a state of things did not last, and after an inquisitive question about wand patterns in general, Antares seemed to remember that the man before him had just implied he was a coward, and he promptly shut his mouth.

Ignoring, the glare Antares was giving him now, Severus scrutinised the boy’s worn appearance once again. The new Slytherins – the likely ones, at least – would certainly not flock to his orbit for any reason aside from those that were purely and predatorily academic, and Severus could simply not see Antares Black becoming some kind of lackey to Lucius’ son. Perhaps out of desperation, but -

“Is there anything else?” Antares burst out yet again, actually starting to get up from his seat. Black eyes stopped him in his tracks and

made him regain his position, looking sullen and somehow not cowed. Severus' brain itched with thought, forethought and conclusion, and still –

“As you are so sure of your position in Slytherin, I suppose I shall soon become your Head of House,” Severus put forth grudgingly, brain still whirring, only just noticing the boy perk up noticeably. “I will give you but little advice for your stay in my House, and let you interpret it as you shall. It is simply this: the only counsel you may trust is your own. I admit that your prospects for,” he sneered slightly, “popularity look thin on the ground. Slytherins are impressed by money, power, wits and cunning, *but not necessarily in that order*. If you play your cards right, you should have gained some sort of standing by your sixth year among your future yearmates, and – ”

“Sixth year?” Antares interjected. “You’re having me on – ”

“No,” Severus cut him off. “I did not say you *would* have gained standing, I said you *should* have, by then.” At the look of nervous incredulity upon the poor boy’s face, Severus tried to explain his theory somewhat. “You must understand that publicly, in this school, I am not on your side. If ever the truth of your true family should come out,” he paused, holding the boy’s eyes with his own, trying to make him understand, “I would lose the favour of nearly every friend, every acquaintance, that I dare claim.” Antares reddened, but – just behind those oddly familiar eyes, there was something rare, something Severus had not thought to come across, even here – understanding. “The consequences, as you can probably foresee, would be devastating,” he continued, imbuing his low tone with all the meaning he could possibly squeeze into a few words, meanings that he knew almost by heart now.

*Capture. Torture. Death –*

“Okay,” was all the boy offered, but the fear Severus saw flicker within was enough to satisfy him for now, accompanied as it was by the all-too-natural excitement that any boy would feel confronted with real intrigue at this age. Silence held for a moment, and then –

“Professor? Professor Snape? I think we’ve lost him – ”

The urgent, anxious tone of Adrian Pucey burst upon them, followed by its frantic owner and his equally frantic friend, both of whom sighed and scolded when they caught sight of Antares perched nervously in his chair. After their entrance, it was all Severus could do to get them out of the classroom – he never normally allowed younger students in it, and it seemed to them some sort of absurd novelty – and finally order them off to breakfast.

And then, all too soon, he was alone, and still somehow worried. Would the Headmaster's words hold true? Did that boisterous, irritatingly curious eleven-year-old boy really own and use the wand that contained the brother of the core of his dreaded Master's wand?

"I suppose it all remains to be seen," he muttered, a little resignedly, to himself, giving the dark classroom one last look before he shut the door. Perhaps, in a month or two, he could really think and worry and scheme as Albus seemed to require of him. But now – it was too soon to tell.

And then Severus put a hand in his pocket and, hit by the sudden remembrance of the salve he'd been supposed to put on the boy's rather shocking burns the night before, he swore, and rubbed at his eyes. It would have to wait for another time, really –

And with that, he headed for his quarters once again, strongly wishing to return to his bed.

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*A/N: Can't believe this darn chapter is done. A bit dark, wasn't it? And I'm sorry if I went too expository or revealed too much – I'll make up for that in spades, I can tell you. And do tell me if you spot any mistakes I (probably) missed. Apologise for lateness – y'all know why, so won't go into it here. Hope you enjoyed it...the next one is certainly on the way.*

## **Chapter 8: And It Begins**

“Welcome to Hogwarts, Mr. Black,” Professor – Professor McGocanall said crisply, looking down her sharp nose at Antares as he fidgeted in front of her. The tone of her voice was bizarrely formal – as if he hadn’t (a little unwillingly) sat beside her at breakfast just a few stilted minutes ago.

Well, better her than the Headmaster, who had been giving him piercing looks ever since he’d shambled into the hall, supported by the overly eager Adrian and Charles. Why, even the way Antares had *fidgeted* seemed to catch the old man’s shrewd blue eyes. Those thirty minutes had seemed like a century –

“Are you listening, child?” McGocanall’s sharp tone cut through Antares’ worrying almost immediately, causing him to start ever so much. Eyes narrowing slightly, she continued. “The first thing you’ll learn, as an apprentice, is that you and you alone are responsible for yourself. You will have many duties and projects to pursue other than the usual academic activities required of other Hogwarts students, so remember – your time is of the essence, and is your entire responsibility. Some allowances shall be made, of course, but still, it will do you good to remember it.

“Now,” she said briskly, turning a little away from him, “you have ahead of you today a mere taste of what life will be like as a full apprentice at Hogwarts.” Antares couldn’t help but feel excited at that. They could be teaching him new *spells*, for all he – “Your first task, young Mr. Black, will be to help our very own Herbology teacher, Professor Sprout, in the greenhouses this morning and some of this afternoon.” Not seeming to notice how the young boy’s face fell, Mc – McWhatever continued on, looking slightly over her shoulder toward the double doors of the Great Hall, which were behind them, and rapidly consulting her watch. “It is a tradition for apprentices to help to ready the school for its intake in whatever means possible, Mr. Black, and today will be the beginning of many such duties – ah, here they are.”

The double doors – or, rather, one of the double doors opened, admitting Charles and Adrian in that order.

“This way, gentlemen,” Professor McGonacall said redundantly, her voice a little sharp as the slightly crestfallen-looking pair approached them. “These two young men are also apprentices. Professor Snape,” she swept a disapproving eye over Charles’ horribly untidy hair and pursed her lips at Adrian’s slightly grubby robe, “informed me that he made sure to introduce all of you, so – if you young gentlemen will be so kind...”

“But,” Adrian said, a little timidly, as the stern professor turned away from them, looking intent on something she evidently considered as more important than leading them to the greenhouses, wherever those were, “Isn’t he going to be given anymore of a talk, or a tour or anything?”

“I am afraid,” McGocanall said, very gravely, “that there is no time at all for such a thing, at the moment. I am already quite late for an important meeting with the Headmaster. If you two would fill him in on some of the lesser duties by lunchtime, I should be most grateful. Mr. Black – until then...”

“Well, I like that,” Charles said lowly, as they all stood there, watching her sweep hurriedly out of the ante-room, “abandoning you, just like that.”

“But the meeting she’s got – ”

Adrian snorted, shaking his head as he started off out towards the main entrance to the castle. “Shorthand, or teacher-hand, as we like to call it, for ‘I don’t know what the hell you strange little biddies do, so I am bailing, thank you,’ ” he said, holding the door open for a still-confused Antares. “She’s never overseen *us*, you understand, or any other apprentices I can remember, so she’s not very well up on what exactly we do.”

“And since she can’t stand either of us, or any Slytherin kid, for that matter, she sort of thinks it’s beneath her,” Charles continued, even as they swung out onto the front steps.

“But what if she *does* have a meeting?” Antares asked, bewildered. The impressive woman hadn’t looked at all like she might be hiding something, so really –

“Well then we’re wrong, aren’t we?”

“But still, it is really rude to just foist him off like that, I think,” Adrian said stoutly as they turned to their right, striking for a well-kept path that seemed to lead to a patch of sprawling green-and-white – well – *things*, for the lack of a better description. “She should’ve asked Snape about the whole thing of what apprentices do, you know – ” Charles snorted.

“Uh, Head Cow of Gryffindor actually going to Snape for advice? I don’t think so.”

“Head Cow?”

“That’s what he likes to call her,” Adrian pointed out, as they came closer to the sprawling green things, which were looking bigger and bigger as they got closer. “He had the nerve – no, the stupidity, to set off a Filibuster firework in her desk in first year, and she’s had it in for him since then – ”

“Merlin, Adrian, I didn’t even know what it was at the time. You know how my mum was – ”

And what followed Charles Warrington the Third’s indignant reply to Adrian’s scornful accusation was a rather long-winded explanation about why all good Slytherins couldn’t stand Professor McGonagall (Adrian finally corrected Antares after practically sneezing with laughter for five minutes), the Head of Gryffindor House, and home to Slytherin’s mortal enemies.

“But that’s all old hat for you, isn’t it? You seemed to know what the houses were on the train, I remember...”

“Yeah,” Antares answered, thinking back to what Professor Snape had said just after rescuing him from that horrifying *thing*, and feeling, as he’d done then, a little better for the knowledge that he’d definitely fit in Slytherin. “So – what *does* an apprentice do, then?”

The two older boys exchanged a look and laughed a little nastily, hanging back from the door to the glassy green monstrosity that must be one of the greenhouses.

“Don’t worry, Black – you’re about to find out. Now, if you’ll just go in there...”

Antares shook his head emphatically, stepping a little way aside. “Oh *no*, after you, I insist – ” And they all laughed, and trooped in through the door, which was slightly ajar, and the day’s ‘task’ had begun.

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Several hours and many ‘apprentice talks’ later (“*You’re definitely going to be worked like a horse, unfortunately. And you’re unlucky there’s no other apprentice in your year to be Sorted with you, so you’ll go up there alone, more’s the pity –*”), Antares had never been so bored in his entire life. His legs ached from the hard work in the greenhouses earlier, and his head hurt from all the horrendously complicated-sounding duties of The Hogwarts Apprentice, which he’d been exposed to throughout the day from various sources. Most of all, he was tired, bone tired as the days when he’d been out expressly to work the crowds, tired enough to need to try not to sway on his feet. And yet he was striding quickly after a disapproving Professor McGonagall to the front doors, and was going to face his future year mates, as Snape had so grimly said hours before.

“Right,” McGonagall muttered. “Any moment now – ”

And the doors swung open in and of themselves, and Antares could see a straggly group of damp-looking kids his age being led forward by – he gulped – Hagrid. Hagrid paled again, mysteriously, but handed the wary-looking set of kids over to Professor McGonagall, who proceeded to try and cow them the same way she’d done to him.

*Oh god, cow – don’t laugh – Head Cow – argh, bite your tongue –*

Somehow Antares managed to keep a straight face, inwardly cursing Charles Warrington’s almost uncanny way with insults and his stupid head’s propensity for remembering them at bad times. But only barely –

“Welcome to Hogwarts,” she began sternly, and Antares immediately tuned out, choosing, instead, to take a quick look at the so-called ‘future year mates’. He was surprised to see that he recognised a few of them, especially the nervous red-haired kid slouching beside the



bloody Boy-Who-Lived. *He* must definitely be a Weasley – the freckles and that shade of –

*Oh, wait, there's Dark Boy – I mean Blaise –*

And truly, Blaise was staring at him, looking a bit more interested than before, and nudging at a prissy-looking girl beside him whose face seemed to resemble that of a rather rich woman Antares had seen last month in – well, in some shop –

“And before we start for the Great Hall, I introduce you to the new apprentice for this year,” he perked up slightly, “Antares Black.” A murmur of shock and curiosity went through the group of uncertain-looking future – blast it, First Years, as Adrian had said, while trying to explain the slightly disappointing rule that said they couldn't play Quidditch – as Antares reddened a little at the amount of looks directed his way, most of them, as was the case with the haughty-looking blond boy, rather disdainful.

He nodded negligently, keeping his face blank as McGonagall gave a spare motion to the partly closed doors behind them and stepped through them once more, not even bothering to command the other First Years to follow.

“The Headmaster will further explain his status and the help he can be to you following your Sorting,” she added now, pausing before the doors to the Great Hall. “I expect you to keep still, approach me when your name is called, and – ” the doors opened – “sit down upon that stool and try on the hat you find upon it. When you are Sorted, approach the table of your new house, which Master Black will point out for you.” The hubbub in the Great Hall ceased as the stern Professor smartly led the still-nervous First Years into it, and, once there was silence, motioned to the now sweating Antares to take his place.

As he moved forward, his face as blank a mask as he could keep it, he tried not to think of all the curious eyes on him, and inwardly cursed the fool complaining that someone told them they'd be fighting a Troll to get Sorted.

*All very bloody well for you, he thought, as the Hat before them twitched and opened its mouth to begin, you don't have to point out everyone's table, or be Sorted separately –*

*“OH, you may not think me pretty – ”*

And the Sorting had begun. Antares fought not to melt into a puddle as the Hat sang its disjointed, garbled song – his skin prickled unnaturally, his pulse seemed to thud louder and louder in the back of his head, and his legs seemed to ache more than ever. Why were people looking at him and not at the rest of the bloody first years? Why was Snape staring so? Why the *hell* was the Headmaster continuing to give him those oddly grave looks?

And why the sodding *hell* wasn't the stupid Sorting Hat's song over, for bloody –

“Abbot, Hannah!”

He tried not to let out an audible sigh as a nervous girl with blonde pigtailed trotted out to the Hat, focusing, instead, on what the Hat called not long after: “HUFFLEPUFF!”

Abbot, Hannah looked downright relieved when he pointed her, a little redundantly, to the cheering, stamping table of Hufflepuffs with a graceful bent of the head that Bella had mysteriously forced him to learn the other day. Reflecting on the odd moments that had followed, he wondered if she'd known, and rightly suspected that she must have –

“Bones, Susan!”

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

*Just stay calm – this will be over before you know it –*

“Corner, Michael!”

“Crabbe, Vincent!” *Great saints, not another bully to watch in Slytherin –*

“Goyle, Gregory!” *Even worse –*

“Lupin, Neville!” *What was the point in Sorting him, anyway? Everyone knew he was a bleeding dead cert for the house of brave idiots –*

“Macmillan, Ernest!” *You were BORN a Hufflepuff, mate –*

“Malfoy, Draco!” Antares tried not to groan at the condescending look he was given from the strutting blond fool, who gave him no notice but a slight sneer when he tried to point him anywhere. A Malfoy who thought he was dirt, whoopee – and in his future House, too –

“Patil, Padma!” *Isn’t there another one of those?*

“Patil, Parvati!” *Thought so – wait, that’s odd, she’s going in Gryffindor, instead of –*

“Potter – ”

McGonagall looked down at her list, looking stricken for a moment, then looked up, face sterner than usual, boldly continuing with the list despite the murmurs of the students going on around her. Antares tried not to roll his eyes – weren’t all the Potters dead? What did anyone *care* –

“Weasley, Ronald!” The red-haired kid barely even looked at him either as he headed for the Gryffindor table, looking vastly relieved as he waved at his raucous brothers – nothing else they could be, with that hair –

“Zabini, Blaise!” Antares sighed with relief as the Hat pronounced the dark, slightly nervous-looking boy a Slytherin, and felt even more relieved when Blaise gave him a sort of jerky, friendly nod as he walked up to the table.

“And now, the Sorting of the Apprentice,” McGonagall announced, now perfectly composed, and glaring at him when he started, having forgotten this was going to take place at all. “Black, Antares!”

Antares strode down for the Hat, feeling hellishly determined – there was no way, no way he was going in Gryffindor to be overshadowed by Wonder Boy Lupin, or either of the other houses apart from Slytherin. Bella had to be counting on it, she'd been a Slytherin, and one of the best, too. When he turned round as he gently picked up the Hat, he nearly dropped it –

*Morgana, everyone is looking at me – everyone* Antares gritted his teeth against the oppressive pall of the criticism and fear in their eyes, keeping his chin as high as he dared. *Only one criminal in our line, and they name us all traitors –*

*I'll show them –*

“Show them, shall you?”

Antares tried not to jerk in his seat as a dry, shrewd voice spoke in his ear.

“I thought you just scanned our heads or something,” he muttered out loud, feeling horribly silly. “Just get on with it, then.” *And don't you dare put me anywhere else but Slytherin*, he added determinedly to himself.

“I can see your overpowering desire to be put in Slytherin *quite* clearly – no need to shout,” the Hat scolded, startling him again. “An Apprentice, eh? I won't be forced into anything, thank you very much, whether you think you've got a mind like an overheated wand or have an opinion or not, young Master – *ah*. What have we *here* – ”

Blinding, shockingly sharp pains seemed to seize around Antares' head as the Hat seemed to contract around it, and as odd, disconnected memories seemed to flash through his mind at a pace that dizzied him.

“Mr. Black – are you all right – ” McGonagall's voice seemed very faint and very far away as the Hat seemed to comb deeply through every memory of him crying, every memory of Bella, going so far back into his reckoning that he couldn't recognise the dark place around him, and he seemed to hear a woman scream –

“Everything is proceeding as it should,” the Hat said aloud, its tone oddly sharp. “If you will permit me to finish my assessment, I should be very grateful, Professor – ”

*My head*, was all Antares could think, as he clutched frantically at the hat brim, *oh, my aching head* –

“Stop that,” the Hat said sharply in his ear. “This starts to look like something serious. Although – I cannot tell...” More blinding pain, more memories – the orphanage – “Well. I do not understand it, but, as there is no time, I will finish this. You have the qualities necessary for almost every House, but the *quantities*...they are the most important thing. Your best bet is, luckily for you, your desired House, SLYTHERIN.” Breathing hard, Antares tried to remove the awful old object, but it squeezed determinedly around his head once more, that dry voice sharpening again. “Be sure to discuss your situation with the Headmaster, lad. It may be more favourable than you think. A year or two should reveal the matter, if you do not already know, so you will kindly report on the matter to me, when it is – ”

A slightly angry sort of noise was the last thing he heard before the Hat was jerked from his head by a worried-looking Professor McGonagall, whose face was very pale.

*No – don’t touch your sodding head, that’ll look even more stupid* –

Antares rose shakily to his feet, feeling mutinous as the Hall murmured around him, and as the Hat seemed to complain to McGonagall in a whisper, edging towards the Slytherin table when she looked up, puzzled, at him.

“Mr. Black – the Hat tells me – ”

“I’m not putting that thing on again,” Antares said through gritted teeth. They could throw him out, for all he fucking cared – he wasn’t *ever* letting anyone or *anything* do – do that to him again. “I’m not,” he persisted, even as the Professor looked up the large Hall to the equally worried-looking Headmaster, who gave some sort of sign that caused McGonagall to nod dismissively at him and start to clear away the dreaded Hat and its stool. He kept his head down as he angled for the Slytherin table, nodding to a surprised-looking Adrian, who

nodded back, and praised God in the heavens that there was a seat empty next to Blaise Zabini, who thankfully watched his approach without complaint, and actually seemed to try to catch his eye as he sat down.

“Any idea what all that fuss was about?” Blaise said easily as he took the seat. “Never heard of the Sorting Hat behaving like that – ”

“Obviously need of some new stitching,” he said viciously, cheeks heating with the amount of stares he was still getting from everyone in the vicinity even as Professor Dumbledore rose calmly to his feet and began to speak. “I thought it was supposed to Sort you, not nearly take your fucking head off.” The considerable eyebrows of a heavily tanned girl opposite him raised in half-amusement, half-fear, but she said nothing, looking down at her plate when Antares glared half-heartedly at her.

“Should I be saying ‘language’ or something?” Blaise said, a hint of embarrassed, wry humour creeping into his voice as Dumbledore warned them against various things that paled into comparison beside the – *Dark, definitely Dark* – Sorting Hat, including some sort of mad warning of death if you went on the third floor.

“Probably, yeah,” Antares muttered, trying to hold back the rippling feeling of angry, destabilised magic that travelled along his arms. How dared they subject him to such an ordeal, when *some* people just hopped on the stool, put on the bleeding Hat and pranced off to sit at their new table? “At least I’m in Slytherin.”

“Never told me you were an apprentice,” Blaise said, nudging him a bit as he picked at the napkin in front of him.

“Didn’t have time, did I?” Antares snapped back, watching McGonagall as she left with the Hat, practically able to just see Snape sneering at what just happened to him. “Besides, I wasn’t then, not for a bit.”

“You didn’t get beaten up back in Knockturn, did you?” Blaise said, looking a little cowed at Antares’ rudeness. The eyes of the girl across from them widened, and she nudged her neighbour, a girl with

a horrid short haircut and a snub nose and began paying attention, making Antares want to sneer.

“Well, no,” Antares admitted, shoulders drooping. “Just don’t go down there alone or with someone who doesn’t know their way round a wand for a bit, the beggars should – ”

“So *you’re* Blaise’s mysterious rescuer from Knockturn Alley,” Haircut Girl said calculatngly, interrupting him. “What’s your name again?”

“Antares Black,” Antares ground out perversely, giving her a hard look. If there was any time to ask, it was –

“As in Sirius Black, the traitor that eats bad babies?” a smug voice said from beyond Blaise.

Now.

“Who knows,” Antares replied, shrugging. It had to be that blond idiot, the smugness in that voice was as distinctive and obvious and so ‘spoiled rich brat’ that it practically screamed *Malfoy*. “My dad was Muggle, so I highly doubt it.” There. Just now, he couldn’t give a rat’s arse if Snape thought it was unwise to go this route, which he probably would – he didn’t even know who his real parents were, and as they could have been a pair of toothless hags armed with fertility potion and a whole lot of luck, saying his dad was Muggle was just as likely to be true as anything else.

“Really? So. You’re a half-blood, then, I suppose,” Malfoy – he was leaning forward, Antares could see the pure condescension on his face – said, disdainfully. “Well – I guess that’s all right, you being here in – ”

“You can suppose all you want,” Antares found himself retorting coolly back. The Hat seemed to have stirred up a familiar stubbornness that Bel- his mother had frequently shouted at him for, and he was blessed if he’d sit and take that – that *statement* lying down. “My mum was Slytherin, and her parents and *their* parents before that, so don’t try to tell me I don’t fit in here, not after that fucked-up excuse for a hat nearly screwed my head off trying to Sort me.”

“Touchy, are we?” Haircut Girl said, sneering slightly.

“Pansy, would you honestly go back and try it on again if they asked you, right now?” Blaise said, shaking his head. “Maybe it likes you or something – didn’t want to be separated from you, like that disgusting turban of that guy over there – ”

“Quirrell, you mean?”

“That what he’s called?” the bushy-browed girl asked timidly, flushing a little as Antares looked up at her.

“Yeah. Met him at my apprenticeship tests – really, really twitchy, I’ve no clue why they’ve got him teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts instead of someone like Snape. He’s the head of our house, in case no one’s told you yet,” Antares got out as the food appeared on their plates, trying and failing to inject anything but a slightly bored note into his tone. He knew he was supposed to be ‘dissimulating important information’ (McGonagall had said something like that at lunch), but honestly couldn’t –

“Do we have a House ghost? Everyone else has one – ”

“Of *course* we have a House ghost,” Malfoy cut in, before Antares could even open his mouth. “The Bloody Baron – coolest one out of the four, turns invisible, so he’s probably – ”

“Well *spotted*, young Malfoy,” a hoarse, grating voice intoned suddenly, from rather *too* nearby for Antares’ comfort. He looked up sharply from his plate and wished immediately that he had not, for the Bloody Baron was indeed there, floating beside a rather sickly-looking Malfoy – thankfully not looking at him...yet. “Ah. The pretender. I see you weaselled your way into Slytherin, goodness knows what travesty you will bring upon this most noble – ”

“ – and ancient house,” Antares said, gripping his wand so hard under the table that he would later wonder why it hadn’t broken then and there, as his heart seemed to thud in his ears, louder than anything else – “But I think you’ve said that, already. Haven’t you?” If the Baron so much as *moved* his way, he’d say the spell – probably set fire to himself, but...wait –



The ghost seemed to quiver with menace for a few moments, then abruptly floated out of place and drifted rapidly down the table to another empty spot, leaving behind a series of stifled (and definitely relieved) sighs from the wide-eyed First Years.

Antares made his fingers uncurl from round his wand, not daring to even exhale. If he did, he was sure to shatter to pieces of tired thief and clutter the entire –

“Hey, Black!” A good-natured shout startled him from his still reverie, causing the awkward, jerky conversation, which had picked up somewhat around him, to quiet down again. “Congrats – we apprentices stick together, eh?”

“Gah, shut up, Adrian – ”

“Thanks, Adrian!” Antares called out dully, leaning back to nod at the grinning boy, feeling something relax just a bit within him. He returned his attention to the table, and was surprised to see Blaise raise his dark eyebrows at him, looking curious. “Met him getting here yesterday on the Express,” he said shortly, trying valiantly to stuff some chicken down his dry throat. “Him and Warrington, anyway – they’re okay, though I got the feeling Adrian would’ve hexed me if I’d said I supported the Tornadoes...”

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An hour or so later, Antares was feeling less worried and less morbidly frightened that the Bloody Baron would try to attack him again, and more sleepy than he’d actually been the night before. Perhaps the long, near-silent walk down to the dungeons had something to do with it, making the first years whisper automatically as they were led down to their new dormitories by a surly Prefect. Antares had to stop himself from automatically darting to the left once they entered the rich, crowded common room, towards the Third Year Boys’ dormitory, in which he’d spent the night.

Instead, the surly female Prefect handed him and the five other boys over to a sleepy, impatient-looking male Prefect, who shortly informed them that they would be given a proper talking-to in the morning by Professor Snape, and to direct all urgent questions to Antares until then, and for god’s sake not to leave the bloody House without an

escort, as the tour of the dungeons was to be the next evening. Oh, and that the showers were that way.

Then the door was carelessly shut, and five boys stared sleepily at each other, then at an equally sleepy Antares for a moment, before the questions broke out.

“What do they mean, a dungeon tour?”

“When’s breakfast tomorrow?”

“Where is the Owlery?”

“Who’s the Quidditch Captain?”

“When’s curfew?”

“And when – ”

*Bang.* Antares blinked, then cleared his throat, trying to disguise the fact that he’d just been impatient, and not really done that on purpose –

“Erm, curfew’s nine for us, breakfast is from seven thirty to eight forty-five. Dungeon tour is necessary because it’s a maze down here, and there are five – no, six ways of getting to the House entrance, all of them different. Quidditch Captain’s irrelevant, we can’t play Quidditch because,” he gave a sulky-looking Malfoy a hard look, “we’re First Years. S’not allowed. And the Owlery – you don’t really need to know where that is for about a week, so...yeah.”

“But the rule’s unfair – ”

“I *need* to send – ”

“And I’m going to *sleep*,” Antares half-shouted, over the indignant replies. “Save your questions for our Head of House, for crying out loud – Professor Snape’s coming in here at *seven*, all right? It’s – what – nine thirty, right now, and if I were you, I’d go to sleep and not be late, because – ”

“Oh, shut up, no one cares what you’ve got to say,” Draco cut in, rolling his eyes at Antares. “*I’m* staying up till ten.” A challenging look stared out of the haughty boy’s grey eyes, and Antares felt irritated and sleepy enough to just let it drop. Let the complete *idiot* stay up till past midnight – he wouldn’t be the one to wake him up when Snape was bellowing at them the next morning, would he?

Antares sank onto his bed and closed the curtains, sealing them carefully with a spell which, though weak, would at least keep them shut for as long as he wanted them so. He tested it, recast it on the curtains at the foot of his bed, then felt satisfied enough to change out of his tatty robes and underclothes into his mended blue pyjamas – a bit short in the leg, but –

He closed his eyes. They smelt of his mum, and that was why he’d snuck them back into his trunk when she wasn’t looking. She couldn’t be here with him, but...her smell...could...

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*A/N: I’m glad this darn chapter’s over, I can tell you. It niggled longer than the preceding one, for me, and I’m just glad it’s finally done. Please forgive and point out any errors I’ve made, and review away! Oh, and I left out both McG’s speech and the Sorting Hat’s song because, by golly, you’ve heard/seen/read them so. Many. Times. By now. And because it fits in a bit more with the tenor of this chapter, so...hope you enjoyed it.*

## **Chapter 9: First Impressions**

If there was one thing Antares would remember about that first, rather horrid morning at Hogwarts, it would be that Draco Malfoy was quite a horrible little boy.

No, scratch that.

Draco Malfoy was a *fiend* in human flesh, sent to torture Antares for being *alive*.

It began with the simple act of waking up, something Antares was used to doing early and quietly. Fine, so he tripped over something in the dark as he fumbled his way out of his curtained four-poster (colour scheme of which he had in mind to change as soon as possible, as he *hated* that sickly shade of green), but still, no one else had been disturbed. No one else, except for –

“What in the blazes are you doing awake?” Draco’s voice was at once plaintive and bossy, a really odd combination that made Antares feel like saying something very crass and very un-Malfoy, just to get the irritating blond sop’s back up.

“Preparing to murder you all in your beds,” was the only answer he found inoffensive enough. “What the fuck do you think I’m doing, eh? Grave-robbing?” *Poncy piece of shite* –

“Do you know just how loud you’re being?” Antares sighed, feeling just the *slightest* bit guilty – he knew he woke really early, especially by these soft kids’ standards.

“Fine, I’m sorry. You only had to say – ”

“And why should I?” Malfoy cut in belligerently. “You should know not to stamp about in the morning like some daft Muggle – ”

“ – and *that*,” Antares said, turning on the blond fool, “is where comments like that end. I won’t have you – ”

“You’re really stupid for an apprentice, you know,” Malfoy remarked, crossly tossing aside the covers on his own bed. “Just because you’re some halfblood doesn’t mean I can’t say anything I like about Muggles whenever I *like*, especially when you’re behaving like one.”

Antares, for a long moment, thought of several things.

Asking the *idiot* if he’d ever met a Muggle –

Simply walking up and giving him a sharp box on the ears –

Or – he swallowed angrily – just letting it go, just this once.

“I don’t have time for this,” he said, trying to sound strong as he left the room, heading for the showers. It was probably better this way – may have been what Snape had meant. But it was galling to see Malfoy roll his eyes at him as he left, and even more galling to hear him arguing that Muggles were lower than animals next door.

Antares slammed the shower cubicle door in frustration. It wasn’t like he particularly cared about Muggles all that much. It was just – his mum had thought like that, and *Snape* had thought like that. That was what the – the Dark Lord was all *about*, to hear his mum tell it (even though he sometimes thought Bella might be exaggerating, because what sort of Dark Wizard would waste time on slaughtering Muggles when they could rob Gringotts? Or take over the Ministry? Didn’t quite make sense). And yet, there Draco was, talking about them like they were human rugs or whatnot.

Antares sighed and turned on the water, wondering for the first time if he was really ever going to fit in here – especially with people like Draco Malfoy.

Then again, the *real* talk with Snape being – what, almost two hours into the future, Antares firmly decided he could afford to feel a bit optimistic. So he washed his hair thoroughly, had a nice, long, piping hot shower, and got dressed behind the protection of his bed curtains, argued to himself that his hair had a little less than – well, quite a bit less than one and a half hours to dry, and his drying spells weren’t that good yet anyway, then spent those two hours playing something

that had been his private, favourite game since he'd been three or four years old.

Apart from stealing, of course, but – still. Juggling objects in the air was a surprisingly calming thing to do of a morning, and Antares put effort into it this morning, making complex patterns, striving not to let the six tiny juggling-balls touch his hands more than once, trying hard to do that double-twist-thing he'd seen some Muggle juggler do –

“Hey, Antares, you'd better wake up pretty soon,” a voice suddenly said, close enough to the barely-open curtains to the left of him that he actually jumped and almost lost control of the damned balls. “You said Professor Snape'd be here at seven, and it's almost that – ”

“I'm fine, I'm ready,” Antares called out crossly, carefully snatching the balls from the air – he had to do it fast, since he couldn't suspend them like that for very long if they weren't moving – and stowing them away. “Coming through...” He stuck his slightly damp head through the curtains, gave Blaise – because it was him – a half-smile, and tumbled messily out of the bed.

“What, you can't walk anymore?” Draco said snidely from across the room, peering at himself with a mirror as he smoothed his hair down with some sort of gelly substance.

“Piss off,” Antares returned easily, so that almost all the boys gave him incredulous looks. “Yeah, I know I've got a foul mouth, but I'm here and it's not going away. Deal with it.” He reached under the bed for his shoes, knowing his wand was within reach and everything, but deciding it would probably be a good idea if only the teachers who tested him that day knew he could – what did they call it – *Accio* things. “And if you think *that's* swearing, well – ”

“Oh shut up, Black. We already know you come from the gutter, no need to rub it in, all right?” Draco's eyes sparkled with amusement and malice even as those two human mountains standing near him chuckled nastily, along with the tallish, scrawny boy in the next bed.

Antares' eyes narrowed as his cheeks grew hot, the impulse to say something fought back by the thought of how stupid it would be to get in a fight on the first bloody day at Hogwarts, and how much stupider

it would be to get firmly on the wrong side of someone who'd have the opportunity to hex him in his sleep until he learnt how to protect his bed and belongings. Which, going by the talk he'd had with Adrian and Charles, wouldn't be very soon.

So he gritted his teeth as inconspicuously as he possibly could, and gave Draco a level look before turning back to Blaise as if nothing had happened, no matter how much he seethed to just put a fist, a *fist* into that face.

Then some male prefect ducked their blond head in and curtly told the first year boys to get out immediately, because Professor Snape wanted to talk to them and talk to them now, and Antares found it a whole lot easier to just pretend he hadn't heard what Draco said.

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The talk was short, to the point, and scathing enough that all four of the girls (who had also been summoned) looked upset enough to cry, and most of the six boys were some fetching degree of red. Even Draco looked far from pale, and that was despite the almost – almost fatherly way Snape had looked at him when he'd trailed those intimidating black eyes over them all. The speech left Antares just as red and just as fiercely determined to prove he *wasn't* some weak little first year with brains as good as a faulty sponge, more because he couldn't pretend very much that what Draco had said hadn't affected him than because he couldn't think to remember that spectacular sight of Severus Snape snoozing with his mouth embarrassingly open on the couch at the house on Spinner's End that had kept (and, if remembered, would forever keep) him from ever appearing really scary.

Breakfast was an early, slightly subdued affair for the first years, or at least until the Gryffindor first years began to trickle in. Draco's pale eyes seemed to take on the same malicious sheen they had when insulting Antares and he announced his plan to leave, practically ordering Greg and Vincent The Mountains to follow him. Which, to Antares' utter surprise, they did.

“Do they not have brains or something?” he found himself quietly inquiring of the girl beside him – that bushy-eyebrowed one. “Honestly, I thought they were just big for their age – ”

“They’ve got brains, I assure you,” Blaise cut in, a disdainful look coming over his face. “Their dads usually stick around his dad, so they’re doing the same. Carrying on the family tradition, I should think.”

“That’s a hell of a legacy to leave your kids,” Antares remarked, rolling his eyes as he thoughtfully buttered another piece of toast. “I mean, I’d rather have no parents than have to follow him around.”

“I don’t suppose they have brains, then,” the girl beside him suddenly remarked, blushing as if the thought of speaking embarrassed her, but holding her chin high all the same. “You’d really have to not have any to do that without being paid, I think – ”

“Spoken like a true Davis, then,” Haircut girl broke in, her tone smug and reeking of condescension.

“Pansy, we’re eating breakfast, no one has the energy to put up with your snobby nonsense,” broke in one of the other first year girls – one Antares found he hadn’t noticed the last night. She seemed to remind him of someone –

“Sorry, what’s your name? Didn’t catch it last night, my head was aching...?”

“Daphne,” she said simply, shoving curly blonde hair behind her ears as she reached out to shake his hand over the table (and around all the food on it). The large, sulky-looking girl beside her gave Antares something that seemed to be half warning glass, half glare, and he decided at once to ask after her too. Not that he could see himself wanting to be friends with her or anything, but she looked like the type of girl who’d be strong enough to hit him and really hurt him. Or close enough, really.

“And your name is?” Strong Girl scowled, but looked oddly pacified enough to reply:



“Millie Bulstrode, full name Millicent. Only grownups are allowed to call me Millicent, mind – call me that and I’ll kick your head in.”

“Fair enough,” Antares immediately agreed. “Oh, and – thanks for reminding me, actually, because I just wanted to say my name’s Antares, and *not* Tares or Tars or Tar or something stupid like that. Only person that gets away with that’s my mum, and she’s quite obviously stronger than me and that. Only other name I’ll accept is Terry. Any – er – deviations,” he said the word hastily, hoping he’d not mispronounced it, “will end up with me kicking your head in, just like Millie would.”

The skinny boy and Haircut girl *and* Millie all snorted, but it was Millie that actually said something, or tried to.

“You’d kick someone’s head in?” She looked him up and down derisively, before turning her attention back to her plate. “Like I’ll believe that – you’re even smaller than Tiny Theo here – ” The stringy boy bristled, eyes narrowing as he replied indignantly.

“Don’t call me that – ”

“Make me, Tiny,” Millie retorted, not even bothering to look up. And perhaps things would have gone a lot more – interestingly, just then, if something hadn’t caught Blaise’s attention at that moment.

“Would you look at that,” he whistled suddenly, causing the boy and girl to stop glaring at each other. “Over there – last table – ”

Antares gave a negligent glance, and felt his eyebrows rise involuntarily. Draco, Greg and Vincent were there, all standing at the end of the table and arguing heatedly – at least, Draco was – with a flushed, angry-looking Neville Lupin. It went on for long enough that more students than just the more impressionable first years to sit up and take notice, and, quite suddenly –

*Bang.* All three boys flew apart with a bright flash, people close to them swearing and scooting away as they picked themselves up off the floor. Anger seemed to pulse off the three Slytherins, but the Lupin kid was absolutely *furious*, and the argument took an abrupt turn for the extremely loud.

“...DISGRACE to the wizarding world – ” Neville yelled, shaking his fist in Draco’s direction in a manner that was just the right side of threatening.

“...you take that *back!*” Draco’s furious rejoinder came, just as two teachers stood at the head table, pointing wands in the direction of the fight just as the two boys seemed to go for each other, and –

“Oh, for crying out loud,” Antares burst out irritably, throwing his roll down onto his place. “Adults ruin *everything* sometimes – ”

“You mean you’d have just watched them hit each other?” Bushy-Eyebrow-Girl said sharply, looking oddly affronted.

“Yeah,” Antares replied, giving her a confused look. “Would’ve been funny seeing Malfoy get his arse handed to him, but...” he shrugged. The girl seemed to be torn between laughing at him and frowning at him, but his attention was diverted from the situation once again as a disgruntled-looking Professor Snape appeared at their end of the table, silently distributing timetables with an occasional word for a few of the Slytherins. Antares sighed with relief, as did the other first years, when their dour Head of House simply thumped down their timetables and moved on to the students – probably second years – on their left. Everyone grabbed one except for Pansy, who took four with a very earnest look on her face that amused Antares no end when he deigned to follow the focus of her gaze. It was a flushed, sullen Draco Malfoy, who was being berated by Professor McGonagall and a sleepy-looking Professor Sinistra. “Ooh, we’ve got Charms this morning, that’s nice – ”

Everyone oohed and aahed over the timetable, which, apart from one or two exceptions, looked truly interesting. It went something like this:

*MON... Charms w/Hufflepuff, morning; History of Magic, Afternoon;*

*TUES... Transfig., morning; Herbology w/Ravenclaw, Afternoon; Astronomy, midnight*

*WED... DADA, morning; APP-S/Astronomy theory, Afternoon*

*THUR... Charms w/Hufflepuff, morning; Transfig., Afternoon*

*FRI... Potions w/Gryffindor, morning; Afternoon off.*

The Potions class, which would be taught by Snape, would undoubtedly be the hardest class to get through, with all the insulting that would probably go on between Lupin and Malfoy, and there was also –

“What’s APPS?” Daphne muttered. “I didn’t know Hogwarts offered anything else – ”

“Oh no, ignore that,” Antares said hastily, gesturing to everyone. “It’s just my Apprenticeship study period thing, no one else’s got to take it – ”

“But when’ll you do your Astronomy theory?” Blaise asked, looking bewildered. Antares sighed – this was probably the one thing he’d never understand about the bloody Apprenticeship thing. Adrian and Charles had warned him he’d have to work harder than the rest of his year to keep up with everything, and that he’d occasionally have odd classes like this in his timetable.

“I’ll make it up on my own, I’ll be fine,” he muttered, even as Pansy frowningly pointed out the Potions class to everyone.

“But what are you going to *do* in the class?” Blaise persisted, looking confused. “Do they teach you something else, or – ”

“They teach me extra stuff so I can help with class demonstrations,” Antares said, mind groaning as he suddenly remembered that odd little session he’d had with that – the really goblin-y teacher – Professor Flitwick.

“So, this morning in Charms, you’ll probably help Flitwick teach us something?” Blaise finally said, hitting the nail on the proverbial head and making Antares blanch and cough on a piece of bacon.

“Oh – egh – I really, really hope not,” he volunteered, heart plummeting within him. Surely Flitwick wouldn’t make him get up before just over half of his year and make him do that stupid charm he could hardly even remember the bloody incantation for. Blaise shrugged and checked the time, and as they all rose from the table,

meaning to start for class, the same male Prefect that had scowlingly fetched them to talk to Snape stopped just in front of Antares. “Erm – excuse me – ”

“You’re the apprentice, right?” the Prefect said impatiently, ignoring the fact that he was blocking Antares’ path to the double doors of the Great Hall, as well as that of Blaise and Bushy-Eyebrow-Girl. “Good – the Headmaster’ll see you just after lunch in the antechamber behind the head table, all right?”

Antares’ shoulders sagged. How much more of this was there? He just knew it – he could just see that horrid old man forcing him to try on the Sorting Hat again, until it ripped his bloody *head* off, and –

“Are you moving at all?” Bushy-Eyebrow said sharply. “Else we’ll be late for our first class – ”

Antares scowled after the Prefect, who had swiftly made his way over to the Ravenclaw table in order to talk to someone there. If only he could somehow fall asleep and wake up in fifth year in Slytherin, and not have to just *deal* with anything right now –

He sighed, shouldering his tatty bag as the chattering group of Slytherin first years walked to the Charms classroom, guided by the sketchy map he’d begged off Charles after getting lost heading in from the greenhouses to fetch something for Professor Sprout the other day. He just hoped Professor Flitwick wouldn’t be very interested in demonstrations this morning...

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“Good morning, class!”

“Good morning, Professor Flitwick,” the mixed class of Hufflepuff and Slytherin first years said back enthusiastically, many of them openly staring at a nervous Antares as he hurriedly distributed feathers to each shared desk, feeling unable to handle the whole situation. He should have *known* – the Professor had accosted him almost before he’d even set his bag down, merrily requiring his help in demonstrating in such a friendly way that he’d been unable to say no. He heartily wished he’d not had time to learn any of the new spells that Flitwick had looked so eager to teach him yesterday, but there

was nothing he could do, now. His hands prickled with the warning of sweat, and he felt like throwing the feathers into a pile and trying to hide behind them, there were so many people *looking* at him. But, as Flitwick went through the roll call, wobbling oddly on his stack of books, his anxiety diminished somewhat. He even sent a covert stabilising spell (a tiny thing Bella had had cause to use on him rather more times than he liked to remember) at the precariously tilting pile of books to keep them from moving, and received a beaming smile for his pains just as the Professor announced busily that Antares would demonstrate the first spell they would be learning.

This, of course, was about when his stomach sunk to his feet.

“*Wingardium leviosa* is the incantation – I trust you know the wand movements, Mr. Black. Off you go...”

Antares blushed, tightened his grip on his wand, which was comfortably warm – almost reassuring – then somehow stumbled to a start.

“Um – *Wingardium leviosa* is a levitating charm, and is very easy to do,” he said slowly, trying not to redden any more as everyone looked expectantly at him. “But, as with lots of spells, the wand movements are just as important as – er – the spell – no, the incantation itself. How I learnt it was – ”

“Professor Flitwick, is he going to teach us the charm?” came the unpleasantly smug interruption of Draco Malfoy. “Because really – ”

“If you’ll be quiet, young Mr. Malfoy. Apprentices are *not* to be disturbed or interrupted during demonstrations,” the Professor said easily, cutting him off then nodding at a (rather relieved) Antares to carry on.

“Er – the wand movement doesn’t require much of – well, it looks like this,” he swished and flicked his wand rapidly. “And you say the incantation as ‘*Win-GAR-di-um* – ”

A few anxious minutes passed as Antares attempted to guide the entire class through the spell, all to the backdrop of funny comments from Professor Flitwick, and robust attempts by the tiny, excitable

teacher to stop a shy-looking Hufflepuff with brown hair and a scared, confused sort of look on her face setting her desk on fire. After what seemed like hours of flitting here and there, dousing flames from the Hufflepuff, whose name he noted for further reference as Megan Jones, Professor Flitwick nodded at Antares to start cleaning up as he rounded up the lesson in the background. Salvaging the few undamaged feathers, Antares finally had the chance to really look at what his classmates had been doing, and, for some of them, still were.

It surprised him – more than half of the class were either dejectedly listening to Flitwick's closing speech or engaging in frustrated jabbing at their feathers before sullenly giving them up to the dirty, slightly sweaty Antares. In fact, he thought incredulously, he could probably count on one hand how many students had actually gotten some sort of good reaction apart from himself. It perplexed him, really – he'd always been able to learn little spells like that without much of a problem, and supposed everyone would be just the same.

*Then again*, he thought privately, stuffing all the rather sorry-looking discarded feathers into a paper bag that Flitwick had just Conjured for him, *maybe that's why I'm an apprentice, and they aren't...*

"All right, class – dismissed – "

Everyone exited the Charms classroom almost at once, all chattering excitedly about their next class. Antares made sure he was near the back as the Slytherin first years went down to the Great Hall in a group, and was mildly surprised that Blaise lagged with him, asking all sorts of questions as they approached the double doors they'd just come through that morning.

"I saw you do some spell on his books, by the way," Blaise said easily, just after Antares had gone through a lengthy explanation of how he'd learnt the Levitation Charm the previous day. "That was actually nice of you – in a sort of teacher's pettish way – " Antares pinked a little. No one had been supposed to see that –

"What? I didn't – "

"Look, I'll just say it, all right?" Blaise insisted, his dark face sobering all at once. "I'm glad you're in Slytherin, Antares. Draco might say – "

"I don't care what he says," Antares said calmly, under his breath so that the blonde little biddy, who was just two or three seats away from him and groaning copiously about how his own feather had only risen a little way from the desk in Charms, would be unable to hear him. At Blaise's sceptical look, he opened his mouth again, but was cut off by the other boy's quiet comment.

"I don't care if you do, you know. He's that kind of person." Blaise eagerly seized the plate of potatoes as it was passed down to him by Bushy-Eyebrow – no, Tracey, he'd seen her answer to that – "Potatoes?"

"Please," Antares said, trying not to scowl as he heard Draco say something about how poor people stank. He tried not to attack the first piece on his plate, he really did –

"So. We're friends, then?" Antares half-choked on his very nice piece of chicken, and, wiping his mouth a little shakily, avoided Blaise's expression of curiosity, trying hard not to think about anything but swallowing and – oh no, the Headmaster had just left the head table, and that had to mean –

*Right.* Antares realised he'd spoken aloud as Blaise raised his eyebrows at him, oddly hopeful. For a long moment, he wondered why on earth the dark-skinned boy was still bothering to even talk to him – he resisted the urge to scowl again – poor, shabbily dressed self. Then he realised that Professor Dumbledore had actually darted back into the Hall again, looking expectant, and he was suddenly on his feet, heart beating a hard tattoo in his skull.

"Yeah. Got to go – meeting with the Headmaster about his bloody hat –"

For some reason, Antares thought, chancing a quick look back as he determinedly threaded his way to the door of the ante-room, Blaise looked awfully surprised he'd said yes. He shrugged helplessly, now steeling himself for what seemed to present itself as another, also inevitably horrible encounter with the Sorting Hat.

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Thankfully, he was quite wrong.

“Take a seat, Mr. Black.” Professor Dumbledore’s voice seemed to suggest kindly things, and not tying Antares to the chair and dragging the bloodthirsty Hat over his aching head, and it made him relax against his will into one of the chairs around the small round table in the room, at which the professor was also seated. “Now, I had a nice long chat with the Sorting Hat last night, and – ”

“I’m not ever putting that thing on again,” Antares found himself saying shakily, hands balling up by his sides almost involuntarily. The Headmaster looked thoughtful and – *odd* – a little startled by his daft outburst, but inclined his head slightly, as if he was taking note of it.

“I did not bring you here to force you to be re-Sorted, Mr. Black, or indeed try on the Sorting Hat again in any way,” he said easily, blue eyes conveying, once more, the sense of calm that had temporarily seemed to leave hold of Antares’ system. “I simply wished to inform you of something I discovered last night, with the Hat’s help.” His gaze seemed to demand some sort of acknowledgement, so Antares nodded jerkily, hands still balled up into fists. “It is,” the old man leant forward slightly, “to do with your biological parents.”

Antares felt himself still with shock and not a little curiosity. He could count on one hand how many times Bella, or, indeed, anyone else, had ever talked about his real parents, and wondered hard what on earth could be important enough for the bloody Hat to try to squeeze his head off. Dumbledore seemed to understand, somehow, what he was thinking, because he continued by saying:

“It is very simple, very sad, and looks to be, unfortunately, rather true. You understand your biological parents are dead, don’t you?” Antares nodded sharply, mind racing back to his mum, heart suddenly aching with the need to see her, or – “I see. What you do not know, of course, is how they died.” The Headmaster rose slowly from his chair, face a mask of uneasy sorrow. “They were murdered, Mr. Black, by a wizard the Wizarding World dreads to this day.”

“The Dark Lord,” Antares muttered under his breath, almost failing to see Dumbledore’s expression tighten somehow, as if he wasn’t quite comfortable with the name.



“Voldemort,” the old man said suddenly, firmly, almost...fiercely. Antares looked up, heart quite free of anything but a longing to see his mother again, and held back his question. He did have a class to go to after this, didn’t he, and asking anything would just stretch this sorry thing out – “I am sorry, Mr. Black.” Dumbledore sat down heavily, his lined old face such an odd mixture of anger and sorrow that Antares felt a little afraid, and – foolishly, of course – a little sorry for the Headmaster. “The Sorting Hat deduced this by the memories you seemed to possess – memories of a struggle, of – of a green light. You understand, that was the sign, the colour of the Killing Curse...?”

“Yeah,” Antares replied, his voice cracking now, with surprise. “But sir – if you don’t mind me asking – why would the Dark – erm, Voldemort,” he forced the name past his teeth, somehow, despite the odd, daft fear that Bella would find out, “want to kill my parents? My other parents, I mean,” he added uselessly, even as the Headmaster’s expression darkened further.

“I am afraid I do not know,” Professor Dumbledore finally replied, after staring unnervingly at some point above Antares’ head. “He was mad, you know – it might have been anything.” Antares’ heart contracted slightly, with fear and an odd sense of regret, and – “Anything at all.” Dumbledore rose again from his seat, his face now calm, free of the oddly strong emotions that had chased across it just now, blue eyes strong and fiercely reassuring. “You need not worry, of course,” he continued, softly moving over to stand by Antares’ left side, robes whispering comfortingly. “You may go to your next class, Mr. Black. Tell Professor Binns I apologise for keeping you.”

And with that, the Headmaster of Hogwarts had left the ante-room, and Antares was mechanically rising to his feet, head a whirl of – of Voldemort and his mother and that burnt, charred place on her left arm, and why on *earth* madmen like him were allowed to just ruin things for people. He’d never known his parents, and though he had his mum, and she was enough, sometimes –

Sometimes, he wondered. Wondered who they were. What might have been, really.

Antares sighed, rubbing at an itchy spot on his back, ignoring the dark looks a couple of Ravenclaw girls gave him as he pushed rudely by them on his way to the History of Magic class, occasionally stopping to get his bearings or politely ask a painting if he wasn't going in the wrong direction. Then, all too soon, he was apologising as he walked into the class, and noting with shock that their teacher was a ghost and avidly discussing it with an excited Blaise, before succumbing to the drone of the introductory class notes that Professor Binns felt obliged to give them.

And that was how the better part of his first day at Hogwarts went.

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*A/N: So...you like?*

*As I said, I had a bit of a time writing this chapter, but I hope it's been worth the wait. I know you'll have questions and complaints and error notes and (hopefully) blatant squeeing, so – er – get on with it. Please. ;)*

*The next chapter's tentative title is Chapter 10: Various Doings, and is probably going to be from Bella's POV unless I change my mind. Which I'm thinking of doing right now, as I've just considered something I didn't think about before, so...yeah. Till then.*

*Oh, and check out my LJ poll, please – just wanted to find out what your crazy reading patterns are for my work in general. It's here (<http://www.livejournal.com/users/uchethegirl/21403.html>), and I've also posted a direct link in a short, short journal entry on my LJ along with this chapter's update link, so poll away! Thanks...*

## **Chapter 10: The Lesson From Hell**

Severus closed his eyes and counted from one to fifty as he rolled stiffly out of bed, mouth sour with sleep, hair feeling greasier than normal. He glared blearily at his pillow, which was also greasy, and wondered angrily if everything would conspire against him this day.

He made his way to the shower, ignoring the feel of the cool air of the room against his stretched, sensitive skin, and the lurid thoughts that waltzed through his head from the sensation. It galled him that it actually took him a minute to decide to spell the water cold, and frankly frightened him that he'd already been stepping, quite eagerly, under the warm spray before he remembered his original intentions.

*Shower, no touching, right –*

Despite the aching embarrassment it infused him with, Severus determinedly spent more than ten minutes paying attention to his hair. His bleak mood was worsened by an unhelpful comment from the cowed (or rather, not so cowed) mirror in his bathroom, so much so that he refrained from cursing it this one time.

That was partially because he was already half an hour late for breakfast, of course. When he returned to Hogwarts later that weekend, he'd make sure to give the blasted thing a proper seeing-to. Unfortunately, plotting the torture of the only mirror within his chambers led him to another, worse train of thought: whether Bella would let him stay the night, or not.

Yet another lurid, writhing picture assaulted his senses at precisely the wrong moment as he entered the Great Hall. Consequently, he noticed all too well that young Draco was languidly pelting a furious-looking Antares with scrambled egg, and felt it his duty to walk on – no, that wasn't – *stop and sort it out, you idiot –*

"Regressing to babyhood, Draco?" he said softly, settling a heavy hand on the startled boy's shoulder. Unrepentant grey eyes flew up to meet his in vain, for Severus only had eyes for the angry flush on the cheeks of Antares, sitting across from Draco. His cutlery was quivering oddly as he determinedly wiped his face free of sticky egg, inciting more wretched pity within the heart of the Potions Master,

whose hand gave a firm, disapproving squeeze to Draco Malfoy's whining shoulder.

"But, Professor, he started it – "

"Five points from Slytherin for absolutely disgraceful behaviour, Draco," Snape said evenly, averting his eyes from the angry hazel pair he could now feel boring into his chest. "You would do well to keep whatever daft little grievance to yourself until you can vent them without disgracing the House, as I advised all of you at the beginning of this week." He straightened, looking piercingly round at the silent first years staring at the confrontation. "I do not wish to see such a nonsensical display again, is that clear?"

"Yes, Professor Snape." Draco's tone was mutinous, as was the look on the familiar features of his face, but extracting the apology would serve, for now.

Or, at least, Severus hoped so. He gave Antares a quick look-over before he swept on to the head table, and was heartened to see that the flush had receded somewhat from his thin face, and he was listening to one of the other first years on his right – the Davis girl, if Severus remembered correctly. *Well – out of my hands, now* – He made his way over to the head table, ignoring the slightly nervous greeting of Quirrel beside him, and availing himself of bacon, toast and the bitterest coffee he could make before even *thinking* of the first class he would have that morning.

Potions, Gryffindor/Slytherin, all morning long.

Severus shuddered despite his usual iron composure. He knew exactly why the Headmaster regularly oversaw the timetable of the first years, had known for five years now, and the yearly understanding of the old man's firm interference was as apt to evade him as not. In the first year with Pucey, Warrington and those abominable Weasley twins, not one class was shared by the new Gryffindors and Slytherins. A smart choice in Severus' opinion – those four *in the same room* for more than an hour did not bear thinking about.

Severus picked up his overtly ornate coffee mug, swirling the hot liquid within it with no real purpose as he continued to think. The next year, of course, with that pompous Smith child and no future troublemaker in sight in any of the Houses, they had all shared classes. This year, however, the Potions Master had been appalled to discover that the Gryffindors and Slytherins would meet in his classroom *at the same time*, and, furthermore (as if making sure the twenty foolish children did not put an end to themselves and him did not suffice), would meet outside on the Quidditch pitch, for Flying lessons.

Severus almost choked on his coffee, remembering how *his* first Flying lesson had gone. He continued sipping the hot beverage slowly, almost dispassionately reviewing the mortifying events in his head as he gazed absently at Antares, who was now animatedly arguing with Draco once more. Bucking broom – frightened first year – it had almost been too easy for an accident to happen. His teeth gritted of their own accord, but were forcibly drawn apart so he could continue drinking.

*And, Severus thought mutinously, dark gaze edging down the Gryffindor table now, as if such a class isn't enough, I have to have Lupin's brat in the same class as well...*

That thought overwhelmed him, forcing him to set down the cup before he threw it in a rather unwise direction and rise from the table, ignoring the Headmaster's gentle inquiry far over to his left. He really did not know what on earth Dumbledore could have been *thinking*, saddling him with such a responsibility. Watching Antares Black could certainly be done just as well in a class with *Hufflepuff*, for goodness' –

*Oh, right. Wrong way.*

Severus whipped round to the left, plunging determinedly down a staircase that would lead him to the dungeons, though well away from his intended destination. If he just prepared for the class and didn't *think* about it, he could survive the fifteen minutes to go, he really could.

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It was a pity, Severus vengefully thought, that circumstances seemed to actively conspire to prove him wrong. From the moment he'd entered the class and begun his speech, he could already feel the thick tension that hovered in the air. Lupin – Neville Lupin and Draco were glaring at each other from opposite sides of the classroom, most of the Slytherin and Gryffindor students grouped around also glaring at each other. Well, apart from Antares – *he* was looking rather uncomfortable as he shakily inspected the cluttered desks of everyone else.

Severus caught his eye almost by mistake, and nearly recoiled – the seething anger behind that nervous, slightly blank expression was far more than he'd ever expected the boy to display, and –

*Ahem.* The roll call, bloody hell –

“Black, Antares.” The boy nodded jerkily at him, going stiff with obedience. “You may take your seat – no point trying further to forestall the stupidity of your classmates just this moment....Brown, Lavender...”

“Present, sir – ”

And the list of names went on, until – “Lupin, Neville...”

“Present, sir.” Severus could not help it, could not contain his almost involuntary reflex of looking up. Perhaps he thought there would somehow be that pale, weak-looking face there, smiling at him, accompanied by three others, three uncomfortably familiar faces. Perhaps that was what made him cruel.

Then again, the very way the Lupin boy fidgeted in his seat was inherently annoying, so –

“I almost *forgot*,” Snape said venomously. “Our new...celebrity...” The expression on that face was almost too pathetic for words – as if frowning foolishly would make one braver – “I am quite curious, Lupin, as to how much of your fame is completely deserved. Shall we have a little test?” Snickering met his ears from the Slytherin side, but Severus was hardly doing this for *them*. He was doing this so the stupid little brat would owl home and ask his damned werewolf

bastard of a father why on earth Professor Snape was so mean to him, and maybe –

“Where can a bezoar be found, Lupin?”

“Erm – I’m – ” Neville stammered, but already the hand of a little girl by his side that Severus had not quite noticed before had shot up disgustingly high, enough that the idiot boy actually gave her a disconcerted look before trying again. “I think it’s from a – a cow, sir?”

Severus smiled, as nastily as possible. So useless, already, at remembering even the commonest remedy that any wise witch would tell her child – almost too easy, this.

“What is the difference, Lupin, between aconite and monkshood?”

Lupin sweated satisfactorily, the obscenely agitated Gryffindor girl vibrated in her seat, hand held high, and no one else raised – their hand. Severus sighed, as if almost relieved.

“Yes, Mr. Black?”

“A bezoar can be found in the stomach of a goat, sir. And aconite and monkshood are the same thing, I think – ”

“Really, Mr. Black? You *think*?” Some of the Gryffindors tittered in concert with the Slytherins, but the boy simply lowered his eyes to his desk, almost absently, a sort of odd half-smile creeping over his face.

“At any rate, that’s what my mum told me – aconite, monkshood, and something else.”

“Professor Snape, could you please tell the apprentice to spare us any more stories of his mum?” cut in Draco in a snide, over-eager tone. “Honestly, he’s told us about her at least fifty times now – ”

“Just like you’ve told us about your all-powerful *Father*, thank you very much – ” Antares retorted suddenly, colour flooding his cheeks.

“I was only asking *the Professor* – ”

“And I don’t care if he’s got enough galleons shoved up his arse to buy up all of magical England – if you can talk about him, I can talk about my mum – ”

“Desist this *instant*,” Professor Snape snapped, unnerved by the way the tension in the class had suddenly ratcheted up a notch despite the low titters of the disaffected members. “I don’t dare to suppose you know the answer, Mr. Malfoy?” Draco stared up at him sullenly, grinding out the answer.

“It’s aconite, monkshood and wolfsbane, sir,” he said, eyes flicking to the significantly paling Lupin as he suddenly seemed to realise the implications of the fact that Neville did not know the plant. He opened his mouth for a moment, as if to push the point, but was silenced by a pointed look from Severus, who had rapidly decided to make sure things did not get out of hand.

He glared round at them all, regaining his seat as his desk so he could finish the roll call, and by the time he’d come to, “Zabini, Blaise,” the class was silent and focused solely on him once more. Snape slammed the register shut, revelling viciously in the way a few of the Gryffindors jumped, then began to bark out orders as he chivvied a horrified-looking Mary – Mary Manders? – into a seat beside a scowling Millicent Bulstrode. The rest of them were already in pairs anyway –

“Class, open your books to page fifty-seven. Begin the boil-curing potion you find there, with your neighbour as your partner – and do not presume to talk. Though a simple potion, you are almost certain to spoil it. Direct all questions to me, if you please, and not to your neighbour, who will undoubtedly lead you wrong.” The students complied, most of them darting Severus resentful looks that troubled him not at all. He stalked over to the pale, angry-looking Neville’s cauldron, having spotted the shaky hands and inept cutting that presaged an imminent potions disaster.

“Some instinct, Mr. Lupin,” he began cruelly, “demands that I place you in the hands of someone more likely to correct you,” he sneered down at the carrot top of the Weasley beside Neville, “than hinder you in any manner. Mr. Weasley, kindly exchange places with Mr. Black.”



“But sir – ”

“*Immediately*, Mr. Weasley. Not one word.” Shaking with pathetic, childish fury, the red-faced, red-haired Weasley gathered his materials and huffily gave way to a wary-looking Antares, who quietly set down his tattered book and notes, making faces at Ronald Weasley’s mess of ingredients. Snape nodded and stalked off to harangue a wild-looking Lavender Brown, who looked like adding a pinch too many of ground snail shell. Moments later, the agitated whisper of Antares reached his ears.

“No, no, *no*, don’t add that yet – ”

“Add what?” came the upset-sounding whisper of Neville Lupin as a disquietingly loud splash sounded behind Severus.

“The quills – get back, get *back* – ”

Severus was halfway through his uneasy turn when it happened. Loud hissing filled the dungeon to the counterpart of a thick, bubbling sound – an omen that foretold nothing but –

“*Get back – everyone –* ”

It ashamed Severus somewhat that the voice of reason was Antares’, and not his own, but there was no time for that – the sight of Antares’ cauldron collapsing into a twisted blob of angry metal as the murky white potion seeped across the stone floor was mesmerising, as were the shouts and screams of the students, most of whom were hopping frantically onto their stools, their own bubbling cauldrons forgotten. It took a minute or two to register the sight of a moaning Neville Lupin, angry red boils springing up all over his limbs, as well as to spot a horrified-looking Antares. He was staring, as if in a trance, at his cauldron, and Severus could not find it in himself to squash the tide of pity and – yes, and guilt that swept over him now.

“Idiot boy!” Snape noted absently that his snarl was louder and angrier than normal, and fought to change his tone as he spelled away the spilt potion. “What on *earth* – ”

"It was the porcupine quills," Antares said tightly, still staring at the remnants of his cauldron as Neville tried to grit his teeth as more boils popped up all over his hands. Severus headed decisively for the pair, hoping to head off the episode he could see unfolding before him now, in the high colour of Antares' cheeks, in the twitching of his boil-covered hands. "You – you idiot – "

"You, Weasley," Snape snapped, tugging the gaping boy away from his partner, the bushy-browed girl that he'd seen talking tentatively to Antares at breakfast, "take him up to the hospital wing, immediately. Davis, you can take the apprentice. And Lupin, that's five points you've just lost for Gryffindor for failing to listen to instruction. Well? Get out!" And, though it took the Davis girl a little more effort to get the shell-shocked Antares away from his cauldron, out they got, and the rest of the lesson was as eminently boring as he'd prayed for, earlier.

Well, boring in principle. Severus' mind was already whirling with how to address the cauldron situation without making him appear suspiciously in league with the furious little boy that had left his classroom – what, half an hour ago? – and without making it appear as if he did not care –

The bell rang, and Severus spat out an assignment before he allowed the mostly frightened-looking first years to leave. Then he sealed the room swiftly, making sure to cover the most common eavesdropping-prevention spells (he never bothered shielding against more advanced ones, as he scoured his quarters and teaching rooms almost daily with detection charms of all kinds) then strode into his slightly disordered office, lighting the fire with a sharp wand movement and going to it.

Then, realising that he'd just made his classroom literally impregnable to the most enterprising student eavesdropper while meaning to actually Floo *out* of it, he cursed.

*That's what you get,* his brain told him maliciously, *when you think too much about a certain someone's cleavage and not the matter at hand* – Severus rolled his eyes at himself, fighting to quell the sudden,

almost overpowering urge to Floo Bella first. He could make it look like a mistake, as if he'd forgotten – something –

He shook his head, ignoring the fresh smell of the hair that whipped round it – he had to pull himself together this *instant*. How he could not seem to wait less than four or five hours to return to Spinner's End was beyond him, and it was just – infuriating the way his mind seemed to betray him at every –

The. Cauldron. Matter. *Get on with it.*

*Floo powder in* – Severus fussed unconsciously with his hair in the split second before he stepped carefully into the hearth and called out, "Dumbledore's office!"

Spinning overtook him for a few moments, and then –

"Severus? Is there – "

"Sorry, Headmaster," Snape cut the surprised statement off quickly, wanting to get this *done* and just – "I need clarification on school policy concerning the apprentices, Albus, and I – "

"Pucey *can't* have gotten into trouble this early in the term, Severus, can he?" Albus' weary-sounding question sounded right, of course, but the slight set to the old man's kind face was almost mockingly false to someone like Severus, who *knew* this man, and knew how to spot changes and discrepancies like that. "Really, that boy – "

"Stop it," Severus found himself saying sharply as he strode for the desk his mentor and erstwhile master was ensconced behind. "I am not in the mood for your games, Albus. You know, or at least have guessed for whose sake I am asking – do not insult me by forcing me to tell you." Blue eyes met black, the momentary twinkle in them dimming somewhat as Severus halted smartly before the large desk. "The school pays for the replacement of damaged equipment of the apprentice if the damage is legitimately incurred during lesson hours, does it not?" The brisk nod took care of that question, and so – "Good. You understand I will be absent this weekend, Headmaster, do you not...?"

“Absent – oh yes, I believe you mentioned it this morning.” *Albus Dumble-bloody-dore* for ‘*where are you going, and why*’ –

“As I just said,” Severus put forth coldly, turning back to the fireplace, “I am not in the mood for your games this afternoon, Albus. If you are so concerned with my whereabouts this weekend, you may cast a tracking charm – ”

“Which, of course, you would remove,” the infuriating old man said, quite merrily. “Pay no attention to me, Severus – I am simply a worried old man. A worried old friend, if I may.” Those innocuous white eyebrows lifted up questioningly, making the professor wish, all at once, to strangle Albus Dumbledore and shake his head at him in quiet mirth.

“I am merely visiting an old acquaintance, you old meddler,” was the sharp retort. “I, as we discussed this morning, I will return an hour or two before lunch on Sunday, and – oh, for goodness’ sake, I am *not* going to tell you.” Severus gritted his teeth, careful to stay facing the elaborate hearth before him.

“I was simply wondering how many old acquaintances you had to visit, nowadays,” Albus said quietly. “No, Severus, I was not asking whom. I simply request that you, at all times, attend to your safety, as usual.” Severus snorted, chancing a glance in the direction of the Headmaster, who had now returned to writing something with the bogus quill in his hands. “Have a good weekend, if you will.”

“The same to you, Albus,” the Potions Master found himself replying as he cast more Floo powder into the hearth. “Professor Snape’s office!”

A minute and a half later, the lunch bell rang, and Severus was brushing soot off his robes as he hustled out of his office, feeling unaccountably as if the Headmaster knew exactly whom he was leaving Hogwarts to see, and why.

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Lunch was a dull affair up until the moment that the shouting match started between two irritatingly familiar late arrivals: a peaky-looking Lupin and a positively pasty Antares. Severus had been glaring

absent-mindedly at Quirrel nearby and only just participating in the conversation Sylvie Sinistra had begun about that convention of hers, and suddenly he could hear young voices rising louder and louder merely metres from where he sat, and was already sighing and rising from his seat, because he just knew –

“And here I am, giving you a bloody *hint*,” Antares was hissing angrily, “So you don’t break the record for cauldrons melted in a Potions class in one bloody week with *other* people’s cauldrons, you stupid lump of –”

“If it’s about your furry little cauldron, Black, all you have to do is ask me to replace it –”

“Well that’s out of the question, because I don’t take sodding charity from stuck-up Gryffindor twerps –”

“But you’ll take it from the school, won’t you?” shouted the Weasley boy, who was not flanking a seething Antares along with the fiercely scowling Neville Lupin. “You make me sick, all you Slytherins – I bet your mum can afford it, and you’re just taking it because you don’t feel like *paying* –”

*It really is ridiculous*, Snape thought to himself, horrified, *how some children will simply say the daftest, cruellest things* –

Antares went a peculiar mix of white and red that reminded him oddly of Bella, and the dishes and goblets on the table within the radius of the three small boys began to rattle insistently. He’d whipped out his sparking wand just as Severus reached them, and was just about to speak, when –

“If you would kindly explain what on earth you three little fools are doing, disrupting lunch, I would be highly gratified,” Snape said softly, voice as menacing as he could make it. Lupin and Weasley jumped slightly – *good, just as unobservant as I thought* – but Antares only gripped his wand tighter, the rattling of the plates around them intensifying. “Black! Explain yourself – why are you here, causing trouble at the Gryffindor table?” Antares turned on him then – a move that Severus idly supposed might be menacing in five years’ time, when the boy might actually be tall enough to really carry it off – and,

after a sharp breath, began to speak in a low, shaky tone that boded ill for the abused cutlery around them.

“I just wanted to speak to Lupin, sir, about the incident in class today, which might not have happened,” he shot a venomous look in the podgy little idiot’s direction, “if he’d been paying more attention to what I was trying to get into his thick head – ”

“There is no need for such recrimination, Mr. Black,” Severus said firmly, his voice cold and firm. “I, as his professor, saw fit to take points from his idiot house and let him suffer the other consequences as punishment for his imbecilic actions, and I as his professor pronounce that punishment more than enough. It is not your duty, Mr. Black, to reprimand him or any student in any way that a professor has not, unless you are given the authority within the course of a class – is that clear?” Antares nodded stiffly, still giving the pair of hostile first years an even, equally hostile look. “Be gone, Mr. Black – and remember I will not deign to inform you of your *duty* as an apprentice again.”

The boy closed his eyes for one moment, then headed off, angry energy radiating from his quick stride as he left the hall, ignoring sneers from the rest of the Gryffindors as he passed them by. Severus watched him leave the Hall followed closely by a worried-looking Blaise Zabini, keeping an eye out for any sort of outpouring of the tension that was thick in the air at the moment. As the doors to the Great Hall slammed after the boy and his following housemate, Snape turned his attention back to the now nervously fidgeting Neville and Weasley.

“Now, as for you...” he mused, glaring down at both of them. “Do not let me hear you sullying the ancient, honourable tradition of the Hogwarts Apprentice with your ignorance again. Every Apprentice,” Severus continued, increasing the level of his voice so all the avidly listening students would hear, once and for all, “is chosen for ability, as you all should know, and if Mr. Black was chosen over you, it simply means – as you, Lupin, should already know – that he has more in his head than the two of you despicable children share between your own.” Some of the students nearby tittered lowly as the two boys reddened with embarrassment. “If I ever hear talk of this

sort again, it will be punishable by points and detention, am I understood?" He didn't wait for their apathetic 'yes, sir', simply returned to his place at the High Table and rapidly finished his meagre lunch, hoping that that blasted Antares was not off somewhere destroying furniture just because two little *idiots* implied some sort of nonsense about his status in life.

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It took far longer than he expected to finally come across the boy in the library.

Severus sighed irritably, putting away his wand as he headed stealthily for Antares, who was sitting a little way apart from the rest of the Slytherin first years, determinedly scratching out something onto a messily cut letter-sized piece of parchment. He'd searched the dungeons thoroughly for half an hour before wondering why on earth he wasn't thinking – a simple Four-Point spell later, he was heading quickly for the library and trying to drown out the lurid thoughts that had been distracting him during the entire search.

Now, then.

"Mr. Black, a word. Immediately." Antares jumped a little, but had hastily grabbed quill, letter and appeared before Severus within minutes. The slightly startled Potions Master inclined his head a little to the right, and, ignoring the inquisitive stares of the youngsters the boy had been sharing the table with, led the way to a slightly secluded spot among the busy stacks. "*Muffliato*. What on earth were you thinking during that entire performance at lunchtime? Do the words discreet and unassuming mean *nothing* to you?"

Antares stared back at him, a little open-mouthed, anger starting to collect behind his hazel eyes. "I was thinking," he replied, through gritted teeth, "about how in the hell I would get a new cauldron of that grade within a week – "

"And you did not think to come to me first as your head of house?" Silence met Severus' curt demand. "Foolish boy – did you listen at all to what Professor McGonagall told you? It is school policy – "

“McGonagall handed me off to Adrian and Charles, so forgive me if I don't know what the fuck you're talking about,” Antares snapped back, folding his arms across his tiny chest with a stubborn look.

“ – to replace school equipment for apprentices as needed – what? You were not briefed by – ”

“No.” The stubborn look intensified, the very construction of it tugging oddly at Severus' memory. *It must be the Black in him, that look –* “Shouldn't you be taking me up for my language?”

“Your language?” Severus found himself repeating, almost stupidly. “I am simply – oh, for goodness' sake, your stupid little cauldron will be replaced, as many times as Lupin destroys it. You are dismissed – ”

“As many *what?* I'm not pairing with him again – ”

“You will pair with whomever I tell you to, Black – my classroom, my rules. Do I make myself clear?” The boy's eyes flashed as he opened his mouth as if about to say something, and that was when Severus struck. “I asked you a question, Black,” he said, very coolly, hoping that the idiot would finally take the hint and just *obey* – “I require an answer. Now.”

“Yes, sir, you make yourself clear.” The words came out a little jerkily through gritted teeth, but it would suffice for now.

“Is that a letter in your hands...?” Severus whisked it from him in an instant, not even pretending to see the look of confused shock on Antares' face as he grimaced at the poor penmanship and even poorer grammar. “For your mother, I suppose...?” Once more, the boy began to retort something, and only just caught himself in time.

“Yes. Sir.” The words were a bit strangled, again, but would do. Severus nodded slowly – perhaps Antares was not quite as thick as he'd shown at lunch. Perhaps.

“You have good timing,” he said now, straight-faced in the face of Antares' fascinated horror as he tucked away the letter in his robes. “I am, in fact, dropping in at Spinner's End sometime during my absence from Hogwarts this weekend, and will deliver this for you.”



Severus found himself struggling with a nasty smile as Antares' mouth worked in speechless – anger? Horror? Surprise? It was not easy to tell from the boy's face, and he'd lowered those hazel eyes confusedly just a moment ago –

"Thank you, sir," Antares said slowly, almost normally. Severus did smile then, briefly – it was just too funny –

"You must rein in your temper, understand?" he said easily, half-turning from the confused young boy. "It is sinfully easy to vex you, and your enemies will only choose the worst and most public times to do so, especially if you go on rattling every object in the vicinity. Revenge," he said, over his shoulder, just on the boundary of the privacy spell, "is best served on a dish that *is not shaking*."

Severus sighed as he left the library, hoping that the angry, yet thoughtful look on Antares' face might actually mean that he'd listened to half of the drivel he'd spouted his way. The journey to his classroom, which would undoubtedly be filled prematurely with frightened third years, was uneventful, and so the last thing he did before slamming open the heavy door with a muttered spell was to check the time, hoping the little talk had not taken as much time as he'd thought.

"*Tempus* – ah. I will be just in time, after this class – "

And with that, Severus Snape swept into his afternoon class, scowling fiercely. The first lesson of the term was always absurdly difficult in terms of re-establishing obedience from his unruly students, and a little veneer of...disagreeability...never went amiss.

It certainly wouldn't now. Severus barked a page number and sneered down his nose at a bored-looking Charles Warrington, hoping all would go well, so that he could leave on time. To see her.

*Bella.*

Severus nearly groaned – when had he gotten so – so – *soppy*? Hopefully, it would not carry over to that evening.

Hopefully.

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*A/N: You like? If so, do tell! I answer reviews! With candy...just kidding.*

*Next chapter is going to be named something innocuous and boring, because I'm totally out of insignificant chapter names! Not that it's not an important chapter, oh no. It'll be from Bella's point of view, and is already sort of half-written. Well, I've done two scenes, really.*

*Yeah. This is a boring author's note, eh? I agree. So let's spice it – er – up! What was your fave moment/line in this chapter? Mine was the revenge line, as you may be able to tell. But my fave scene to write was the Albus-Severus scene, because I love writing Crafty!Dumbledore.*

*Oh yeah – please! Canon compliance-ing! If you notice any weird little departures or stuff that I can easily fix and haven't, do tell. And any other errors in general as well, as I seem to miss the weirdest little things. Thanks!*

## **Chapter 11: Various Doings**

It was really funny how one could go on without someone.

Bella had pondered it for the last week or so every night, sleeping in the bed she'd shared with Antares once, breathing in the smell of dirty hair that contrasted with perfume she'd absently dripped onto the sheets – for what purpose, she could not remember.

Nowadays, she divided her time between the rooms of Severus' house almost equally, with nearly fanatical precision. She slept in Antares' room at night, bathed in Severus' slightly larger toilet, cooked in the kitchen and ate on the same table Severus had (she blushed. She *still* blushed, which was completely irrational, as she'd not blushed at that singular moment) propositioned her across.

Or had that been the other way around?

Bella sighed, drawing a wide-toothed comb through her slightly recalcitrant hair, making sure to pin it carefully away from her face as she put half of it up in a bun. Not too tightly, so she didn't look any more stretched or thin, and certainly not too loosely, because it was sweaty from her day at Madame Malkin's, and certainly not presentable enough to be an ornament to her however she wore it. Mother had always said there was a perfect way one could wear one's hair, and Bellatrix liked to think that she'd almost discovered one for herself. The escaping tendrils helped to soften her face that much more, and her hair was pulled away from her face without actually being 'up', and –

"Oh, Merlin," Bella said, throwing down the comb, colour seeping into her cheeks, "He's already here, the irritating –"

For the ward she'd thought to set on the Floo connection on returning home this evening had just chimed, and Bella could not think of anyone else that might know she would be at home at this point, or know where home even was.

*Still*, she thought, casting a hasty Disillusionment Charm on herself so she could actually be sure it was Severus, *no point in being careless...*

“Bella?” Severus’ weary, yet oddly eager voice floated up to her on the stairs. “Are you there?” Fighting the impulse to simply remove the Charm and descend to see her – well – lover? She was not quite sure yet – Bella took the stairs two at a time, moving as silently as she could towards the kitchen door, which was where Severus’ voice seemed to be coming from.

And she was not wrong, for Severus was indeed there, spelling the soot off himself, an odd look on his face. It looked like some strange hybrid of boredom, weariness and – Bella tried to quell her rising emotions – disappointment, and, as he strode over to the kitchen table and grudgingly took a chair, she decided to reveal herself.

Behind a sturdy shield, of course –

Severus started and half-rose from his chair upon her sudden appearance, wand in hand, the strange look replaced by the supreme alertness she remembered so well from the old days.

“What does my son have on his back?” she got out, a little clumsily, trying not to blush at the confusion in his eyes as she spoke. Security questions had been all the rage when they’d known each other, he couldn’t possibly have forgotten by now –

He stared at her for a long minute, making her wonder if she couldn’t have asked a dafter question. How was he supposed to know that Antares had –

“Burns,” Severus said, sheathing his wand and regaining his chair as she relaxed. “You’ll have to tell me how he got those at some point.”

“I can’t,” Bella replied, sheathing her own wand as she approached the worn kitchen table, “He’s always had them, I should think.” She slid into the chair beside him easily, trying to restrain the impulse to touch him immediately.

“You should think?” he said in mocking reply, running tired hands through hair that looked curiously lighter, “Such a fine mother you are –”

“Don’t,” she cut in, voice sharper than the new, still curiously fresh feeling of loss that glanced across her heart yet again. “Just – don’t.” Severus’ eyes sought hers out as he snorted, his wary, slightly abashed expression belying his slight sneer. “They’ve always been there – they weren’t even close to raw when I found him at the orphanage,” she explained lowly, examining her fingers because she was not quite sure if it was appropriate to touch her lover’s – future lover’s large nose. “I tried a burn salve and healing spells, and yet...” Bella shrugged. “It was part of what made me think him magical, really.”

Bellatrix bit her lip as Severus nodded slowly, wearily, wondering if the odd yearning to touch him, just keep touching him, was going to linger with her throughout his short stay.

“I have news,” he said abruptly, suddenly changing the task as he stood up to fetch a couple of mugs from a nearby cabinet. Bella said nothing – just waited, patiently, trusting he would tell her – “His Sorting into Slytherin was...odd.” Severus’ voice had gone low, perilously near that husky depth that had startled her that first time, but she couldn’t focus on that right now, the news was about Antares – “The Hat Legilimised him, and found out information about his biological mother and father indirectly – you recall how it sifts through memories of new students, I trust? Well, it found out something.”

“Really.” He eyed her almost speculatively as he wearily conjured a gently smoking teapot complete with tiny, ornate little pots of milk and sugar, an occurrence that signalled his very real exhaustion to her. Bella sighed a little, because she remembered the almost utilitarian front he’d put on everything during their service as a Death Eater – not one transfiguration had been more detailed than necessary, not one spell had deviated showily from its purpose in any way, or shown more than a minute stamp of its caster. The only thing Severus had ever been remotely showy at were his potions, and she remembered someone (she refused to remember who) joking that that was because potions was Severus’ area of expertise, and he only therefore stood out in that capacity, so to speak, because he *had* to. So nothing about him had ever given away details of his shadowed, murky past or precarious present, except for times like now, when he

was too tired to think about whether his conjured tea set was innocuous enough to escape her notice.

“His biological parents were murdered, Bella,” he put forward roughly, not meeting her eyes as he nudged a steaming mug towards her suddenly still form.

“Really.” Silence spread between them like some sort of hideous disease, and Bella could not find it in herself to move. She did not know how she knew, how this new knowledge did not surprise her more. She shivered, stretching out a hand to draw the mug of tea towards her, trying not to feel Severus’ eyes on her. Was it some sort of curse, something that followed her around, or –

“The Hat confirmed it emphatically,” he said, voice still harsh as his fingers tightened about his own mug, face showing the strain of that thought, that insidious thought that Bella somehow knew he had to be thinking. They were tainted, both of them – irrevocably tainted, and somehow the taint had reached a charming, skeletal hand into Antares’ life, and – “It even predicted the time frame – said it was one of the years between 1980 and 1983, and probably...”

Bella was barely listening, the words swimming murkily in and out of her head as she wondered, wondered who Antares’ real – Morgana, that word *hurt* – real parents where, who they had been, what they had done to earn the – fury of –

*Whether*, she thought, her hands tightening unbearably about her mug, *I helped kill them* –

“You need to stop that,” he suddenly said, voice very low and very persuasive as he slowly, silently entangled her stiff fingers from around the hot mug, chafing them slightly between his for a minute as she pressed her left hand to her head.

“Murdered by whom? You didn’t finish,” Bella said, her voice sounding sharp, accused, wounded. Severus started somewhat, staring at her in puzzlement.

“You can guess, can’t you?” he said, almost too low for her to hear it. “It was a shock, for me – ”

“Not for me,” she replied sharply, pulling her hand out of his dry ones, forcing herself to sip at the hot tea. It didn’t burn her tongue, and was only just this side of palatable, and – “It strikes me as unfair, you know. Mordred knows why.” She paused for a moment. “As if I can never escape him and – and everything he *did*. Sometimes it amuses me – a few years of raising hell, and you pay for a lifetime.” Severus seemed likely to disagree for a moment, then nodded, slowly, turning his attention to his tea.

Bella did not mind, in the least, and smoothly changed the conversation, before she could do or say something more foolish. Severus went along with it wordlessly, listening easily to her shop prattle and her feeble complaint about the pillows on his bed. She blushed soon after, of course, having realised how – how much innuendo that could inspire, and tried to hurriedly cover it up with a talk about the general state of the bedding in the house, and whether or not he would like it all altered if she had the time. Severus, of course, said yes, and Bella did not miss, could not miss how his eyes flickered down to the front of her dress almost involuntarily, and she felt suddenly, desperately like having his arms around her.

The thin reality of their brittle, nearly one-way conversation just did not seem enough to hold back the horrible, guilty thoughts she was having, of nights of heady, forbidden exhilaration, of nights of destruction, and pain, and things that she caused, and –

She set down the mug with a decided clink, drew his face to hers with her hands, one warm and one not quite cold, and kissed him. It felt – so warm, so oddly wet, like the first ever kisses she’d stolen with that sop of a Ravenclaw once upon a time. The kiss lengthened and broke at slow intervals, and Bella revelled in it, revelled in the warmth of her lover’s arms around her, in the not-so-smooth slide of their lips together, and it was...it was understandably a long moment before she remembered what they had been speaking of.

And, Bella reflected, as Severus shrugged a little breathlessly and reached for her again, that was probably a very good thing.

“I was going to ask you, you know,” he whispered into her neck, some minutes later, as they twined in each other’s arms in the doorway that led to the staircase. “About this, about us – ”

“Be quiet,” she told him, smilingly, reaching down to pinch him as she wondered whether it would make him jump.

It did, and Bella spent the next two hours paying, after a fashion, for her five minutes of mirth.

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It came as a welcome shock to wake up, the next morning, and find him in her bed. This time, Bella did not need to feel under the sheets to know that she was naked, because of the body pressed up so warmly against her. For a long moment, she allowed herself a foolish, sleepy smile – it had felt so *long* since the last time they’d touched each other like this. Like it had been a year ago, instead of merely one week, give or take a day or two.

Bella actually had to suppress a sigh as she turned over smoothly, not wanting to wake him up, as well as not wanting to sound *too* content. To whom, she did not know, and had a far more important task on her hands – or, rather, in her arms. With a slow, steady motion, she peeled the sheet off their intertwined bodies, not even bothering to look at the patches of tan skin she knew belonged to herself. The pale, mostly smooth skin was far, far more interesting, despite the fact that she had seen it before, perhaps in a less convivial context.

Ha. Convivial, indeed.

Bella suppressed a groan of remembrance – the rituals required of them in the service of her former Master had required rather a lot of nudity from time to time, and since she, Rodolphus, Rabastan and Severus had all been necessarily part of the most powerful members Inner Circle, they had been forced to grow accustomed to the indignity of it. Particularly herself, of course – half the foul men around her, she’d known, had seen more than enough naked women, willing and unwilling, to serve a lifetime, and they’d all stared anyway. Even – Bella blanched a little – Severus had.



Well, *that* memory would certainly be going into the growing room aptly labelled 'Do Not Disturb' in her fragmented mind. Rather, Bella preferred to shift delicately away from her snoring lover so she could look properly at him, like she'd always preferred to do.

She hastily dismissed resurfacing memories of staring at her ex-husband's body, cataloguing the scars, the smooth muscles, and, focusing on the task at hand, took a deep breath and looked.

She wrinkled her nose.

*Well, he does look his age*, she allowed, taking in the somehow softer angles of his wiry, unforgiving frame. He had a nice rear, she would concede that, yes. And nothing to complain of in the – ahem – frontal department, quite a lot of nothing, actually, and – he *had* washed his hair.

Bella's mouth fell open abruptly as she stared at it, fanned messily over the hideous, hideous pillow, dark and *clean*. She touched it almost reverently, thoughts spinning. She was someone hopelessly inured to symbolism, and she knew it and tried to limit it sometimes, but just now, she gave in.

*It means he's serious.*

*It means he washes his hair on Friday mornings*, a snide voice said in the back of her mind. *Really, Bella –*

*It was greasy the last time*, she insisted to herself. *Did I say something by mistake? Or did I shy away from it, or –*

*The man knows his hair is disgusting*, the snide voice continued. *He washed it because he has inclinations towards basic hygiene, you sentimental fool. It may have been washed days ago, and all this talk of seriousness is merely your imagination overreacting on seeing clean hair. Which is inherently daft.*

Bella sighed guiltily, still thinking. The snide little voice at the back of her mind was probably quite right, and she was probably overreacting, reading meanings into Severus' innocently clean hair.

*All the same, I can't overlook it, can I?*

"Overlook wha...?" Bella twitched in surprise, not realising she'd voiced her last musing sentence, as her warm lover shifted sinuously against her. "Come here," he muttered confusedly, drawing her upper half down till it was flush with his, all hardened nipples and sleep-warmed skin sliding nicely together. "You didn't quite finish paying, last night," Severus whispered, his low tone sounding the more wicked for the laziness that sleep added to it.

"I didn't," Bella agreed, and promptly went back to paying for her – er – transgression, the matter of his hair momentarily pushed aside. *Well, not quite*, Bella thought, running her hands through it as she mouthed her way along an inviting expanse of warm skin. He started a little in her arms as she made her way down to a clearly satisfyingly inflamed spot, and Bella could not help grinning. Especially when he almost let out a moan, just catching it in time.

*Not bad, Bella*, she told herself, sliding languorously out of the bed as Severus weakly tried to follow, the expression on his face one of such embarrassed satiety that it made her grin anew. *Not bad at all...*

She grinned all the way through breakfast, because Severus' eyes, though just as sharp and mocking as was usual, were very firmly attracted to her mouth and fingers, and remained so throughout the meal.

Later on, after she'd taken pity on him and put her offending articles to very good, very brief use once again, he sighed and began a conversation she was quite sure he did not want to have, from the way he kept avoiding her eye despite the earnest, determined set to his face.

"Have you ever given thought as to why on earth your son is so susceptible to teasing, Bella? It will get very annoying if I have to reign him in every time, you know," he said shortly, carefully tucking himself back into his (stained, and it made her grin mischievously) pyjama pants. "Stop that," he added, pinking quite delightfully.

"What?"

“Stop looking at me in that obscene manner,” he chided, rising shakily from his chair to ostensibly get some more water.

“Stop presenting me your arse,” she said lowly, taking great pleasure in the severe blush that spread to the back of his neck. “All right – tell me.” Severus sighed exasperatedly, now thudding a jug of water on the table next to a tall glass.

“I was hoping you would answer the question, Bella.”

“Oh – the anger, you mean?” Bella forgot that a real live man that was her lover was standing half-dressed across from her and scowling in a fashion that, for him, was almost handsome. “I’ve always wondered if it might be me, in fact. I’m not an appropriate parent, I know that much, and displaying or emulating authority in any way has always been a rather touch-and-go thing for me, so – ”

“That explains nothing,” Severus said sharply, taking his bare chest and planting it insidiously close to by seating opposite her. “He gets provoked at small things, and so far has not done much in the way of preventing their occurrence,” he explained, more slowly. “Ma – one of the boys in his year is getting to him with alarming frequency, and with his propensity for accidental magic – ”

“Just say it’s Lucius’ son, Severus,” Bella said, a little more coldly than she should have, staring at her fingers as they remained wrapped around her rapidly cooling mug. “I know the bastard’s little brat was born in the same year, for crying out loud – give me some credit.”

“I had thought – ” Severus began, but cut himself off with a sigh. “Forgive me.”

“You should probably apologise first,” Bella snapped back. He gave her an incredulous, affronted look.

“Excuse me – the words ‘forgive me’ no longer construe an apology?”

“Of course not. The proper thing to say is ‘I am sorry’. Try it.” Bella could practically see the irritation washing over him, but just felt so out of sorts that –

“Don’t do this,” he said quietly, surprising her once again, before abruptly continuing with his tale, his expression, if anything, only becoming more earnest than when he’d begun. “If Antares was any weaker magically, Draco could make his life torture. And, as these things often are, since the boy probably has more magic in that burn scar of his than Draco Malfoy has in his haughty little head, his life so far seems to have been worse than torture. For an eleven-year-old, at least.”

“What am I supposed to say to that?” Bella asked, her voice getting angry again as her mind swept her through a dizzying montage of memories of just how cruel a Malfoy could be, would be, if they perceived you as weaker, or stronger than them. Severus sighed, rolling his eyes.

“Just – write to him, or something,” he offered lamely, after a minute of making frustrated noises.

“And then my dear little cousin would proceed to steal his letter and read it out loud, mocking it thoroughly,” Bella said, tone turning vicious as she, unhappily, found herself remembering doing that with Lucius by her side, to some hapless third year. “Why do you think I don’t care how long it takes for him to send me one? I knew something like this might happen.”

“Well – ” Severus set down his glass, going over to where his cloak was discarded, by the kitchen door. “I actually – thought to – bring this,” he presented her a slightly grubby missive with a spare flourish, fingers reaching up to get at that point by his left eye that he always seemed to be rubbing when stressed, or thinking of or speaking to Antares. Bella tried not to grab at the letter, and set it down while she untangled her fingers from her hair, a warm feeling sliding heavily into her chest.

She soon had it open.

*Mum, it began, in awful, slightly misshapen letters, the Sortin Hat tried to kill me at the FeasT, but they got it awaY from me in the end. Class boring part from Potionz and Charms, but schools okay. Blaze is in my house – that rich kid I stooped from kicking his head in*

*KnockTurnAlley. Bastard named Draco here, hes a malfoY, makes life hell. But food is great. I miss you, and*

Bella carefully set it down on the table, tears stinging as she lightly caressed the odd little squiggle at the end of the letter, at which point Severus had probably taken it from him. For a long moment, she felt as if breaking contact with it would be an awful, awful thing, and could possibly kill her, but someone's warm hand had enclosed the one that was touching the letter and was not touching it any more, and nothing happened. Somehow, that made it easier for her to let out the first quiet sob.

Severus silently manoeuvred her into his arms, smelling wickedly of sex and his musty bed, and awkwardly rubbed at the base of her spine. Bella suddenly felt a giggle rising from somewhere – somewhere still young and silly in her, and she let part of it out, ignoring the slight shock that tensed her lover's body against hers.

"Can anything be done?" she finally said, trying not to sniff, whether at his neck or because she was crying.

"There is only so much I can do to keep Draco away from – "

"Not that. His handwriting. I didn't really understand what illegible meant until now." When Severus stiffened, then chuckled darkly into her hair, Bella took revenge, biting at what she was starting to think was a sensitive spot on his neck, and the conversation went rapidly to the dogs. Or, rather, tumbling off the chairs and onto the reassuringly supporting floor.

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"I really should get something done," Severus muttered, an hour later, in her ear. Bella nodded, sliding carefully away from his slippery warmth and rising to fumble around for her wand. "You're not helping," he said, an oddly petulant tone creeping into his voice.

"Avert your eyes, then," she said carelessly, applying a thorough Cleaning Charm to her body, and, after a minute of hesitation, to his. "I will necessarily get something done today, as I am due to report at the shop at one." Severus sighed behind her as she wriggled into her

tattered nightdress, feeling slightly worse for the wear for all the rapid – er – movement they'd done within the last hour.

Scratch that, the whole *morning*. Bella blushed a little, clearing away the remains of their scanty breakfast as the noises of Severus struggling into his own clothes tempted her from behind.

"I wanted to ask something," he said in her ear, slipping arms about her waist as she bent over the sink, wanting to ascertain that nothing was wrong with the plates inside, as they had suddenly stopped clanking a moment ago.

"I am not preventing you."

"Antares had an encounter with the Bloody Baron, you see," Severus said, hands reluctantly caressing her waist after she'd slapped them down from much higher up. "It was – oh, everything seems to happen to him so violently – "

"What?" Bella said, stilling. "What do you mean, violently? There's nothing violent about a ghost – "

"Do you remember the Baron at *all*, Bella? I walked in on the thing terrorizing him for pretending to be a Black." Bella dropped her wand, anger coursing through her. "I thought I should let you know – "

"If – if only I could just have a word with that ghost," she said, through gritted teeth. "My bond with him is recognised by the Ministry – "

"Are you sure?" Uncertainty seeped into her heart as she scrabbled clumsily around in the water in the sink for her wand.

"I never checked, but I thought – "

"You should, then." Severus paused for a moment as she dried off her wand with a nearby tea towel, tensing a little behind her. "Was it the *Convixi concessus*...?"

"No," Bella supplied, suddenly realising why he was really asking her. "I wonder what his birth date is down as, then – it must be horribly confusing for the Quill at Hogwarts – "

*“Adstrictus cruori, then?”*

“I wonder what birthday he would like,” Bella said, deliberately vague. “I’ll stop by the Ministry on my way to the shop, then.” She disentangled herself from his reaching arms, whisking out of the door and up the stairs.

*“Adgregatus in familia?”* followed her up the stairs, making her smile. At least the day would be an uncomfortable barrage of sex *and* questions she did not want to answer. She did love bantering with men, and no one was better at it than Severus.

When properly coaxed, of course.

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Three hours later, Bella was sweeping the rich folds of the Countess Barrene’s soon-to-be-robe onto an as-yet shapeless mannequin, muttering angrily to herself. There were times, she thought, reeling off the spells that would ready the mannequin for work while she made herself a well-deserved cup of tea, when she wondered why on earth she still worked with Madame Malkin and tolerated her insidiously treacherous ways. How that woman managed to foist so much work off onto her without immediately appearing a tyrant continued to amaze Bella every time a situation that brought it on came about.

Today had been a prime example. The Countess had been brought to the shop by another loyal and frequent customer – Georgina Allbright? Something like that, anyway – and had proceeded to insist on using some newfangled cloth she or her doting husband had bought in Saudi Arabia to make up a set of formal robes for the Ministry Ball that every worker in Madame Malkin’s knew would be occurring within a week. Madame Malkin had been closeted with the picky young woman for almost an hour before the slight woman swept out of the shop, looking pleased as punch.

Madame Malkin had duly stolen Sally away from a sparkly robe she’d been finishing off and begun work on the odd material, and for the next hour and a half, had called for assistance from each and every sewer in the shop at least once or twice. By the time Bella was getting ready to leave (and idly wondering whether Severus would be at home), the large woman was in a state of high dudgeon about their

collective failure to make the fabric look like it should, and Bella had dutifully gone in to take her turn at the dark, glossy folds of deep green, and had unfortunately had the most success at wrestling the bodice into half-arsed completion.

Madame Malkin, returning from a well-deserved five minute break for tea, had looked upon the half-ready bodice and pronounced that Bella would take the robes home and finish them (all the while manoeuvring Bella into admitting that she had an idea of needling them into submission, and therefore indirectly conferring on her a responsibility as an employee to do so), and that had been that. Bella frowned now, sipping carefully at her milky tea as she stared absently into space, recalling the terse directions her employer had given.

*“Low in the neck, but not absolutely improper; reasonably fitted bodice; loosely draping folds for the skirt. Oh, and no waist – she said she saw it done somewhere on a woman as thin as her, and it looked beautiful – ”*

Bella drained the cup and set it down, a little harder than normal. She'd have a quick nap first, then – wait, there was a note from Severus – there –

*In Diagon and Knockturn for supplies. Will return at half seven.*

She smiled, crumpling the note and tossing it into the fireplace after waving the cup and saucer into the sink. A nap first, and then she'd get to work.

Bella closed her eyes.

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Half an hour later, she woke with a start, reaching out to stop the burning of her wand and wishing she could just languish away on the sofa until her lover came back. Instead, she rose, summoned her nightgown – *I'll be comfortable, then, if not well rested* – and approached the preening mannequin that was fussing with its foamy hair in the mirror. After a minute or two of cajoling, she'd gotten the silly thing to stand still while she transfigured a low turntable and affixed the (horrified) mannequin's feet to it, so it would at least stay in one place while she worked.



*Now, if I can just find that thread –*

Bella worked for far longer than she'd thought she would to just drape the robes properly, adjusting the heavy material over and over again on the twitching, fussing mannequin. It frustrated her no end that she was simply unable to make the heavy, stiffly rippling fabric look good on the slight frame of the mannequin formed after the likeness of the Countess Barrene. Every trick of robe-pinning failed dismally, and Bella despaired – Madame Malkin had *trusted* her to get this done, and would certainly have her head if she could not finish fitting the robe in time for the preliminary check-up tomorrow.

Bella sighed and stretched, hoping against hope that she would be able to just get it done, and then, just as she was about to give up and stow away the irritating thing, it hit her.

*There are other ways of pinning, aren't there?* A little wrinkle formed between her brows as she stared into space, mind travelling back to that studio of sorts, and the desperation on that wobbly muggle's face as he'd called for seamstresses. Bella wrinkled her nose in distaste – she'd only taken the muggle's desperate offer because she'd been desperate herself, and she'd actually had the skills his employer was looking for. In a very vague way, Bella had been taught to mend and sew, with magic and without.

Most importantly, she'd been forced to learn how a garment was put together – raising an angry little boy on next to nothing usually dictated Transfiguring or making one's own clothes. And, as transfigured clothes never tended to mend properly, wear well or last very long, Bella found it more worth her time to actually make the clothes by hand.

She smiled to herself – being at the studio had been frantic. She'd always been mending and altering and trying to rein in Antares all at once, but the very busy nature of the work had consumed her, stopped her from over-thinking her situation in life, or from bitterly remembering things she wished to forget. Bella caught absently at the badly-draped sleeve on the mannequin, tugging the fidgety, wandering thing back to her side. The wages had been tolerable, of course, and she and Antares had also been consistently well and

warmly dressed for the first time in years. As silly as liking that had made her feel, it had definitely counted for something.

Bella sighed, unpinning the sleeves of the robe. The job hadn't lasted, as many things had not, but – well. She would at least try the techniques she'd picked up and see if the stubborn fabric would yield to methods mundane. A sly smile stole onto her face as she rapidly deconstructed the bad-looking robe, snapping at the mannequin when it tried to wander off again. She renewed the sticking spell to its impertinent complaints, making it stronger this time – how it had worn off, she could not imagine –

*Right – what have we here...needle, thread, scissors, pattern, I...think that should be it.* Bella nodded briskly and got to work.

At the very least, she'd know that she'd tried *everything*.

Two hours later, Bella was still smiling slyly, turning the preening mannequin this way and that as she surveyed her work, having finally removed the sticking charm so she could really see how it moved. The robe had yielded, indeed, to – Bella snorted to herself – the sheer devilry of muggle methods that she'd stubbornly employed. Instead of puckering in odd places and looking horribly dowdy, the robe now flowed sleekly, the beauty of the dark, slightly shimmering fabric properly unveiled. Satisfied with the result, Bella set about spelling the seams together permanently, and was so deeply involved in the process that she started when Severus Floo'ed in with his normal aplomb, calling out to her as usual. She replied absently, carefully extracting the pins and crude stitches by hand.

"There you are," came the familiar mutter from behind her. Bella looked back, suddenly feeling very awkward and very messily dressed.

"You're early," she blurted out foolishly as she returned her attention to the mannequin, unable to keep herself from running a satisfied hand down the front panel of the robe, which was now free of the slightly disfiguring pins and stitches.

"You are wrong," Severus curtly informed her, advancing slowly, a wry sort of amusement seeping into his face as he joined her to

watch the mannequin wobble towards the fireplace and preen in front of the wide, slightly tarnished mirror hanging over the flames. "I am an hour late, actually," he added, a little reluctantly. Bella smiled at him, in no mood to feel affronted.

"I hardly noticed," she offered truthfully, shrugging and turning back to steer the mannequin back onto the shiny turntable she'd temporarily transfigured from half a log of wood out of the small pile in wizard space beside the fire. "I've been working all evening trying to get this awful thing ready, so..." Her breath caught as she felt Severus loom close behind her, radiating musky warmth, suddenly reminding her of waking next to him earlier on. She felt her face heat as he awkwardly settled a hand on her waist, moving even closer.

"How...industrious," he muttered into her ear, almost negating her effort to keep looking over the nearly-finished garment. "Perhaps I should – "

"Don't even think it," she said, voice a little sharper usual. "No silly jokes or insinuations, thank you: I've had quite enough of those to fill my lifetime twice over."

"Really," he breathed, nibbling slowly at her ear so that she found it hard to quell a shiver. "How disappointing for you, then." Bella smiled – he was just always so sarcastic – and turned to press a quick kiss to his cheek.

"After dinner, thank you," was her prim answer, but it had the effect she'd desired. Severus snorted lightly, tightening his hold on her for a moment before stepping back. Bella's smile widened as she admired the flow of the tamed, thick fabric that now swished satisfactorily around the ankles of the stiffly pivoting mannequin instead of flapping disgracefully.

"Isn't this a trifle indecent, just here?" Severus asked, cutting into her whirring thoughts as he gestured carefully at the nearly nonexistent bosom of the mannequin, which was quite tightly clad in the now considerably lower-necked robe.

"Oh no, the Countess has lovely collarbones," Bella said, moving to inspect the fit at the back of the robes and to extract another pin

she'd missed. Severus shot her an annoyed look that quite clearly said that was *not* what he'd meant, and she could hardly keep from smiling again. "She's quite young, you know – very progressive about such things. And it won't look indecent on her, either, with such a boyish figure –"

"Really." Severus' short comment intimated a great many things, not the least of which implied that nothing could possibly mitigate the bad qualities of the dress, and that was why Bella found herself saying something rather unwise.

"If you saw it on me you'd understand." Her lover looked up sharply, a predatory glint in his eye.

"What are you waiting for, then? Let's see it on you," he said lowly, making the innocent words sound little more than a sly proposition. Bella blushed hotly, but tapped the mannequin defiantly, carefully drawing off the robe once it stilled and spelling it so it would fit on her, at the very least. Severus retreated slightly to the nearest sofa as she laid the heavy robe carefully over the back of a nearby chair and began to divest herself of her clothing.

It felt like she was an age in doing it, somehow – the air fairly crackled between them, and she could feel his eyes caressing her as she reached out for the robe, goose pimples peppering her skin where it was bare. And, very quickly, the electric moment was over, and Severus was rising to take a closer look at the robes as Bella adjusted them carefully around herself, pleased with the feel and fit.

"See? The front's not quite as low as it looks, and the sleeves are just wide enough to allow a sleeved chemise underneath without it looking odd in the least," she said, eyeing the top of the garment critically in the mirror over the fireplace, trying not to think of how lovely it would be to have something like this for herself. She could wear it when Severus was here, she supposed –

"I think you're quite right," he said softly, sounding a little surprised. "Now, would you take it off?" Bella eyed him, a wry smile on her lips as she noted the slight colour on his face.

“You actually prefer that tattered nightgown to this?” She said, running a wistful hand over the loose folds around her waist.

“Yes,” Severus said shortly, more colour seeping into his cheeks, the look in his dark eyes an oddly predatory one as he turned hastily away. “Now – you said something about dinner...?” Bella nodded absently, wriggling out of the robe as carefully as she possibly could.

“Let me just – get out of this – first,” she said, panting slightly as she cast off the green robe. “I think you might be right as to your preference – my old nightgown is certainly more comfortable than *that* – ”

Throughout dinner, Bella could really not understand why Severus kept on blushing. It might have had to do with the way she ate her meal, somehow getting juices of the chicken (which was lovely) onto her fingers so she could carefully lick them clean. It might also have had to do with the fact that she kept leaning over towards him and not caring that her nightgown might show a little more than was necessarily right.

Whatever the case, it was all satisfactorily solved an hour later on the same couch he’d ogled her from – a trifle indecent, really, but very – very thrilling, in a way Bella had sometimes forgotten that her memory could lay claim to remembering.

And why did she need to remember anything, anyway? Severus was very warm...and...

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Bella woke with a shiver, feeling cold air prickle at her skin. Bare – oh Merlin, she was asleep on the couch, at this hour. What would Severus –

– say. Bella blushed, then gave into a small smile at herself. It was really a little ridiculous, feeling this way because his very warm, very manly, very aroused sleeping form was draped all over the floor before the couch. Contriving to roll down onto him and the results of that experiment took up the hour she usually reserved for preening to her satisfaction, and made her hurry into her clothes and pull back her hair in the most unflattering way.

Severus groaned at the clock and at the fireplace and said his goodbyes as petulantly as was possible for a sleepy, still-naked Potions Master to be. He told her he would not be here at the house for lunch as that would be cutting it close, and it wasn't until after Flooing into Madame Malkin's little office with the carefully wrapped robes in tow that Bella realised she would not be seeing him for another week.

She sighed, pressing a light hand to her head. At the very best, after sleeping next to him and having him stalking round the house – *his* house again, the coming week would feel like two.

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*A/N: Hellooooo, people! I had no idea how long this chapter would turn out – just kept adding in little bits to flesh it out, and hey presto! Six thousand words and counting...*

*Anyway, I'd just like to thank everyone who's reviewed and cheered me on so far, especially to those who've been dropping me lines about my murderous italic usage and the fact that things aren't always clear or easily understandable in this fic. I hope this chapter has shed some kind of light on how Bella's life has been for the huge ten-year gap between the prologue and chapter 1. And worry not, I'm still working on PTT chapter 4 (am maybe about a third of the way through), and even on La Danseuse.*

*And, lastly, the next chapter will be called Chapter 12: The Sky Calls. Hint, hint. ;)*

## **Chapter 12: The Sky Calls**

“It’s up!” Ted Nott’s triumphant tone broke abruptly through Antares’ reverie, making him blot the bizarre creature he was absent-mindedly drawing on the inside of his Potions notebook. He looked up and around the rather empty common room and spotted Ted’s thin, excited face peering at the notice board up by the fire, and could not help remembering the hullabaloo he’d raised sometime into the middle of last week. Ted had made his own little announcement to the Slytherin world about what to call him about a week ago (not Theo, not Dora, and definitely not Theodore), and backed it up with a nasty hex he later refused to discuss with anyone but a cowed Millie Bulstrode. Blaise had been leery of talking to the sullen boy, as he’d been one of those who had repeatedly called him Theo beforehand, but that had all been settled at dinner yesterday, when he and Antares had been forced to sit next to Ted.

Antares rose clumsily from his sunken position in the soft chair, stretching as he wandered over to an overly excited Ted. Blaise had been absolutely terrified of sitting next to Ted (not that Antares himself been very eager to volunteer to do so anyway), and it hadn’t taken a minute of fierce, near-silent negotiation for Ted to notice there was something odd going on.

“Are you going to eat standing up, or something?” he’d said derisively, and Antares had sullenly dropped into the seat beside him, darting Blaise a look that had said, as clearly as he could make it, ‘you owe me. Big time’. Ted had noticed that too, and chose the next time Antares grudgingly passed him the gravy to spring his question. “Why don’t either of you want to sit next to me?”

“Because he’s a pansy,” Antares had found himself saying, nastily, “and because you hexed Millie’s leg off for calling you Theo, Theo.” Ted had bristled predictably, and the worst argument Antares had had at Hogwarts to date had ensued. Not then, of course – later on, in the dormitory, just as Draco wandered off to shower (not after dropping snide hints about smelly poor people), Ted had methodically walked over to Antares’ bed, dragged him out, and slammed him against the wall.

Antares smiled now, nodding easily to an engrossed Ted as he leant to examine the notice board. He'd had to keep a clear head then, to stop both himself and the other, furious little boy from doing any real damage to themselves (especially since he didn't think Mum would be very happy with him blinding some pureblood kid), and it had been far easier than he'd thought to let the insults from both Draco and Ted roll off his back.

Besides, he'd pretty much won easily, and that had definitely made the insults appear much more pathetic in hindsight. Draco had given him a wide berth for a few days after that, but, of course, that hadn't lasted. But it certainly wasn't nearly as painful now to hear the blond boy call his mum a beggar, or anything.

"Flying lessons – see?" Ted said impatiently, when asked what on earth he was looking at. "I can't *wait* –"

Antares stared at the board.

**FLYING LESSONS, it said, GRYFFINDOR/SLYTHERIN:  
WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON, HUFFLEPUFF/RAVENCLAW:  
THURSDAY AFTERNOON.**

Antares gulped, and barely heard Blaise's impatient request of why they weren't going down to breakfast yet, and what was on the board that was so fascinating.

Three weeks into the term, the fires of Antares' private hell (also known as Hogwarts) seemed to be quieting somewhat. He and Blaise never got really, truly lost anymore, especially if they avoided certain staircases and hallways. He'd learned precisely when to say something to shut Draco up and when to let the little tyrant finish mouthing off. He learned not to get in the way when Draco wanted to harass Neville Lupin and Ron Weasley, and learned that Professor McGonagall was fair to everyone to a fault, but still didn't necessarily like him or any other Slytherin he knew of. Antares had learned to write a reasonably legible essay without splattering himself with ink from head to toe, and learned to hide the long, beautifully written letters from his mum whenever a distracted Professor Snape produced them. He'd even learnt how to write smoothly in even lines on parchment (thanks to a convenient lining charm Blaise had shown



him), and his handwriting was quickly becoming less embarrassing now that he had samples to compare it to that he actually cared about, as well as frequent writing lessons with Professor Sinistra (who was always nice to him).

One thing, he reflected now, staring at the notice, that he'd somehow not been able to learn, was how not to be afraid. Antares hated the feeling that crept up and down his sides whenever the Bloody Baron passed him by, but didn't know how on earth to get rid of it.

*Besides, he thought now, there's nothing wrong with being afraid of that bloody bastard – everyone is. They just don't say.*

Now, being afraid of flying lessons, that was stupid.

"Come on, Antares, you've been staring at that stupid board for the past five minutes – "

"Don't you see, Blaise? He's in awe – it'll be the first broomstick he's ever seen..." Pansy and Ted snickered meanly at Draco's joke as the rest of the first years trickled out from the corridor that led to the dorms. Antares ignored their laughter, exiting the common room with Blaise and hardly listening to his friend's running commentary of his disgust with Draco Malfoy.

"He's so pathetic – you'll see at breakfast, he'll be nattering on about how he escaped from a Bellykopter over the summer holiday on his two-bit racing broom – "

But Antares found it hard to be contemptuous of Draco that morning at breakfast no matter how much he seemed to deserve it, because of a very simple thing: Draco was not afraid of flying, and he was. Without even ever trying it. Antares was actually shaking inwardly at the thought of being so high above a jeering crowd (they would be jeering at him, obviously), while Draco, in contrast, was practically salivating at the thought of the lessons, reeling off increasingly unbelievable tales about airborne escapes from Muggle Bellykopters and Aurors (Blaise gave him a disgusted look), and even the normally sort-of-sensible Vince Goyle was whispering excitedly with Ted, who looked just as psyched about the topic as Blaise looked bored.

At that, Antares fought back a nervous smile – he should have known that Blaise would hate the idea of playing Quidditch, really. All that *sweating*...no, Blaise (a moderately rabid Pride of Portree fan) would probably rather offer himself as a virgin sacrifice for luck to the Montrose Magpies rather than be caught dead sweating on a broom. Now, Tracey – *she* kept quiet during the discussion, but Antares could sort of see, if he looked out of the corner of his eye, her excited fidgeting, and the dreamy look on her face.

“It barely caught me!” Draco was insisting. “Clipped my tail, I swear – ”

“My wanderings through the dungeons as a rat are very *dangerous*, I’ll have you know,” Blaise was muttering under his breath, in a breathy imitation of Draco. “Really, Mrs. Norris has nearly eaten me *twice*, and I’ve seen what’s under Professor Snape’s robes far more times than is good for a young, impressionable boy of my age – ”

Antares laughed out loud, just as a passing Tracey Davis tried hard not to do. Draco only favoured him and Blaise with The Malfoy Stare for a minute (“Only a minute? That’s crap, I should’ve said that louder,” Blaise complained) before launching back into his narrative. He and Blaise were off soon enough, Antares groaning at the prospect of another mind-numbingly boring class with Ever-Twitchy Professor Quirrel, and feeling better about the weird start of the whole day deep down.

Now if he could just deal with the fact that falling off a broom with Draco and Pansy Parkinson watching absolutely terrified him, he would be fine.

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“M-Morning, class.”

“Good morning, Professor Quirrel,” Antares droned along with everyone else in the class, settling into the feeling of unwilling boredom that hung over the twitchy man’s class like a cloud. He stared at his hands, sighing, wishing he had more to do than ‘make sure everyone had their textbooks and writing supplies out’, as he’d been instructed to do.

He scowled as Professor Quirrel flopped back into his seat and began to call the roll. This class was supposed to be *exciting*, for goodness' sake – he'd looked forward to it, after that spell (Sexpelliarius? Expelliarius?) he'd twizzled Quirrel into teaching him on the day of the tests. It had been bloody cool seeing the man's wand slip out of his hand just so, because what looked more like a wavering beam of light from Antares' wand had hit his hand.

If only –

"You may t-take your s-seat, Mr. Black, thank you," Quirrel said formally, and Antares' scowl deepened. He was damned if he was going to sit and listen to another daft story about garlic and vampires that everyone here had probably heard about a thousand times, honestly –

"But, sir, I thought we were doing the practical demonstration today," he found himself saying obediently, refusing to move an inch. Quirrel stared at him for a moment, and opened his mouth as if to say something, but Antares cut him off. "You know – that spell you showed me at the tests? We're up to chapter 15 now, and it calls for a demonstration – "

"But – " But everyone in the class was noticeably perking up, and surreptitiously sliding their books open to Chapter 15 (*Morgana, let the chapter number be right*), and Quirrel looked like he was noticing that too, and could maybe be convinced –

Antares walked up deliberately to the duelling platform as diffidently as he could, as if he was maybe being forced into this. "I'm ready when you are, sir." Quirrel gave him a sharp look, the expression on his face more forbidding than anything Antares had ever seen on it. He just fought the urge to cave in, feeling Draco's unbelieving eyes on him, and drew out his wand with a firm flick in and out of his robes.

For a moment, Quirrel stood still, and Antares wildly wondered why on earth he'd thought this was a good idea, because he was soooo one step from a detention, and he couldn't *get* one this week, with all the homework he had, and –

Professor Quirrel smiled, a small, trembling one, and whipped out his wand. "Give me a m-moment t-to explain, then," he said almost easily, turning his focus back onto the exited students before him. "The s-spell we are about to s-showcase is a simple one, as Mr. Black said, but h-h-highly u-useful. It is c-called the," he took a stuttering breath, as if to ready himself, "Disarming Charm, and has th-th-the incantation *Expelliarmus*, and needs little to no wand movement – " he waved his wand in a tiny semicircle, the look on his face interestingly determined as his stutter became less pronounced, " – so you can p-pay more attention to what your opponent is doing to retrieve his or her w-wand. N-now, Mr. Black, if you will d-d-demonstrate..." Quirrel strode jerkily over to the small platform and stood a healthy distance from Antares, who felt his chest constrict in anticipation and fear.

*You won't muff this, you've done it before –*

"*Expelliarmus!*" Antares called, and didn't have the time, this time, to feel the way the magic trickled from him and flowed towards the waiting Professor, hooking the wand from his hand, because it almost wasn't working, as if there was some resistance behind it, like Quirrel was gripping it tightly. The small beam of red light glowed between them for a moment, and Antares, beginning to panic, just *pulled*, and – there –

A look of surprise flitted across Quirrel's face as his wand almost popped out of his hand, but it was gone before Antares could really think to wonder why the man was so surprised, because he was already speaking –

"Well d-done, Mr. Black. Again, p-please, and h-hold your w-wand s-s-still this time – "

For the next fifteen minutes, Antares was made to wiggle his wand in all sorts of contortions and silly things in order, Quirrel said, to illustrate that the spell really was simple, and that wand movements didn't affect it as much as they did some other spells. Antares had just begun to really settle into not feeling like an idiot when Draco dared to interrupt their teacher.

“Er – Professor? We’re going to have to try it, aren’t we?” Antares could only struggle to hide his amazement at the fact that Draco was actually *helping* him in his nefarious plan to practice new spells – Draco had only ever tried to insult him or snidely suggest he was thicker than the doors in the dungeons during his arduous teaching demonstrations. For the little prig to actually help him, consciously or not, was simply –

“Professor, should we put our books away?” came the obviously excited voice of Tracey Davis, and then it was completely inevitable. Quirrel tried to speak several times, but was cut off by seemingly helpful requests from each member of the class, who had now cottoned on to Antares’ mission and were vying with themselves as to who could shove their books out of sight the quickest and who could earnestly question Quirrel on the incantation in the most interested voice.

For a moment, Antares thought that Quirrel would say no, out of sheer nervousness, but the man seemed to give him an oddly sharp look and suddenly decide.

“All right, ch-ch-children. W-w-wands out...”

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As the bell rang for the end of the long period, Antares felt a feeling remarkably similar to the panic he’d felt on launching into his disguised defiance of Quirrel at the beginning of the class blossom in his stomach as everyone began to leisurely put away their things. He hurried, trying not to make it look like he was hurrying, because he really, really, *really* didn’t want to be made to stay behind and talk to Quirrel about his practically overturning the man’s lesson plan for this morning, and things weren’t looking good for his escape. For starters, everyone else was packing up languidly, still buzzing excitedly about how cool the class had been (despite the fact that it had only been about one hour of practical demonstration and a stammered lecture from Quirrel the other two-thirds of the class), and it made him look woefully out of place as he shoved his book and parchment and wand into his bag as fast as he could.

To be fair, Blaise, who he'd managed to make understand that no, the class today had never been headed towards the height of coolness it reached this morning, and that yes, he'd probably get in trouble for it, was hurrying just as well beside him, but Antares could feel that sickening feeling he always felt coming over him as he was about to get caught. As everyone began to leave through the open door at the head of the class, he finally saw Quirrel's look of barely disguised displeasure and obvious positioning next to the door and wearily decided that he'd been doomed from the start.

"Antares?" Blaise hissed, making it sound more like 'N-tares' in his haste. "I thought you said you needed to hurry up..." Blaise's voice trailed off as he spotted Quirrel leaning against the door jamb, nodding nervously as Greg and Vince stalked heavily past him. "Oh." Antares' grip tightened on the worn strap of his school bag as he and Blaise approached the door, and he felt monumentally stupid for thinking the Professor wouldn't think to head him off. "Do you want me to stay?"

Antares darted an incredulous look in the direction of his friend's whispered offer, and slowly, firmly shook his head. Though he couldn't believe how much he'd misjudged this, he also knew somewhere at the back of his mind that the most Quirrel could really do to him was give him detention for the rest of the term, or something. It was really nice of Blaise to offer especially when it wasn't his fault, so –

"Thanks," he whispered back, ignoring Tracey Davis' inquisitive look, "but no. He's hardly going to off me or anything..." And they both couldn't hold back grins, because how silly was that? Professor Quirrel was the last person Antares could think of in that way – he'd actually be more afraid of his mum in the same situation, for goodness' sake –

"Mr. Black," Quirrel said, somehow suppressing his stammer for a moment. "Please r-remain behind, I need a w-word with you." *Well, so much for the stammer.* Antares shrugged and nodded, pasting a pleasant, bored look on his face as Pansy and Daphne filed out after a still slightly amused Blaise. "Mr. Black – "

"I'm not sorry, sir," Antares said, adjusting the strap on his now slightly aching shoulder, meaning every word of it. Satisfaction blazed through him as the surprised expression on Quirrel's face gave way to puzzlement, even as his smart side groaned at his stupid defiance. *This isn't the time for games, you pillock*, it ordered, and Antares sighed and dutifully gave in. "I mean, sorry, sir."

"I heard w-what you s-s-said, boy," Quirrel said, that sharp look returning to his face as he shut the door. "Just b-because I tolerated y-y-y-your misbehaviour today, Mr. B-black, does not mean I w-w-will tolerate it again," the Professor finished off as firmly as one could while stammering. Antares kept back an irritated snort and nodded, mutely, trying hard to look at least a little contrite. It wasn't his fault that Quirrel had the ability to make what could probably be the most exciting class at Hogwarts into another sleeping period, was it? He was sick of being respectful and nice to this quivering idiot that could probably barely hold his own against Snape, and –

"Y-you weren't even up to d-d-demonstrating the ch-charm p-properly, you silly boy," was the sudden, manifestly odd follow-up to the firm statement Antares had expected. "You t-took longer than your first time to disarm me... Now," Quirrel said, almost imperiously, beckoning a mystified Antares over as he strode towards his large desk, "tell me what you d-did wrong on that f-first D-d-disarming Charm."

"I didn't," Antares said defensively, disliking the sense that he didn't know where this was going. "You were holding your wand too hard, that's all – "

"Was I?" Quirrel said, leaning forward over his slightly messy desk in a slightly avid manner that was a little unsettling. "And – and yet you s-succeeded," he continued, tone going thoughtful. Antares tried not to scratch at himself – he really didn't know where on earth this miserable conversation was going, and was starting to feel quite nervous as to what his punishment would be – "Keep practicing, Black," Quirrel suddenly said, straightening up in his chair as he drew some scrolls of parchment closer to him. "Perhaps you may be as g-g-good at Defence as I thought..." The professor's voice trailed off

into that strange thoughtfulness again, and Antares could no longer keep back his desire to leave.

“Am I dismissed, sir?”

“Certainly,” was the quiet, contemplative answer, and Antares did not stick around to hear it twice. Professor Quirrel was positively unnerving sometimes, with that stinky turban and his constant nerves and stammering, but today he’d surpassed that somehow. Behind that strange, innocent-sounding guess was something Antares did not understand, and it only intensified his already quick stride as he made for the Great Hall. And the absence of punishment left him with a feeling of dread in his stomach – no one ever let you off like that if they didn’t expect something back, so –

*Wait – what was that?*

Antares paused momentarily, looking behind him. It sounded like a sob, like someone crying – *wait, there it is again* – “Hey? Is anyone there?” Antares sighed inwardly, irritated that he couldn’t even stop the words leaving his mouth. *I have a problem, I really do* – “Hello?”

“Go away,” the Sniffler answered, sounding very plaintive and very young. Antares didn’t even waste time trying to make himself obey the sad little command, because he just – he just couldn’t. He’d never been able to stand ignoring someone in need of real help, and since he was supposed to help people here at Hogwarts as an Apprentice, he could explain it away that way. Or something.

“Are you lost?” Antares called out, making his tone as practical as possible. That always helped when helping people, in his experience. Most of them usually buttoned up and accepted it that way, so.

No answer came, and Antares fidgeted, not really wanting to call out again, because it would only make him feel more stupid and silly for staying at all. Maybe his theory was wrong. Or maybe it was because the person sounded like a girl – girls were always weirder to help –

“I – *sniff* – think so,” came the tentative answer, almost too quietly for him to hear it. Antares headed slowly in the direction of the voice, and immediately came upon a tiny little alcove set back from the corridor,



and he sighed uncomfortably, because it was a girl. And, even worse, it was *that* girl – the one Snape seemed to hate, and the one who always asked the most questions. *What's her name again? Gringle – Granger? I think that's it...*

"Granger?" he ventured, pretending he didn't see how red and pathetic she looked as he sort of sidled into the alcove. "Where were you going that you got lost, anyway? I thought you were smart – " But that turned out to be the wrong thing to say, because she started crying again, sniffing horribly into her hands – "Granger, I meant that in a *good* way," he said, a little desperately, taking courage as the tears paused for a bit. "I get lost too, so – come on – " And, determinedly not thinking about what the heck he was doing, Antares practically dragged her to her feet and sort of looked away while she wiped her face, filling the awkward, sniffy silence with chatter. "I usually ask the portraits for help if I'm lost, or if I think I'm heading in the wrong direction, and they always help. They know a lot more about the castle than most of the teachers do, I think..." Antares' voice trailed off as Granger stiffened and wriggled out of his grip. "Where were you going, then?"

"Library," she said, obviously lying. Antares rolled his eyes, but forced himself to be civil anyway.

"Well, it's lunchtime now, so you'll be wanting to go to the Great Hall instead," he said, avoiding her reddened eyes. "It's down this corridor, so you'll just keep going down here to your left – " he pointed away from the DADA classroom, " – and ignore the fact that there are more doors on it than usual. Elmira Ecklebird's portrait told me three extra classrooms are on this hallway on Wednesdays. So. Goodbye." Antares, adjusting his bag on his shoulder, started off in exactly the direction he'd just pointed Granger, not really expecting her to say anything in return. He supposed Gryffindors were even more exclusive about talking back to Slytherins when not arguing with them, so it made no difference that she didn't –

"Thank you." Antares couldn't help looking back, and, seeing the look of real gratitude on her face, nodded shortly, feeling oddly gratified in return. People he helped didn't always thank him, so he supposed it was just a bit of a bonus, today.

*Or maybe all Gryffindors are polite*, he mused, slowing slightly as a large group of students streamed out into the corridor from one of the classrooms on his left. *Or maybe just the ones that are smart –*

“Watch where you’re going, Slyther-sprog,” an all-too familiar voice said as Antares bumped into someone he really, really hoped was not one of the Weasley twins, but was equally sure that it was.

“You going to even apologise?” another of them said, springing up just in front of him out of what felt like nowhere. “Or is it part of your house’s motto to be rude and nasty to everyone else?”

“Well, sorry, then,” Antares blurted out, distinctly feeling that something very humiliating was probably going to happen to him very soon. “I don’t bump into people on purpose, you know.”

“Ooo!” the first one gasped, grasping comically at his brother’s arm, a fake frightened look on his face, “Fred, the Slyther-sprog *apologised* – ”

“Back away, George,” the second Weasley said, tone filled with exaggerated fear, “it’s obviously down with some kind of brain disease, he could be catching – ”

“I say we run for it!”

“I agree!”

“Let’s go!” And with that, the Weasley twins dashed away into the Great Hall, mock-running-in-terror and directing even more eyes (and laughter) Antares’ horribly embarrassed way as he continued heading for the Great Hall. It really wasn’t fair – you never could win with those two. If you were nice to them, they mocked you. If you were just polite, they mocked you more. If you traded insults with them (as Adrian and Charles were regularly reputed to do), they played embarrassing pranks on you with no care for whether it was in the middle of a test or during a boring part of the day that didn’t need to go well, and they always did it to you with an avid audience of laughing students, most of which Antares knew were relieved deep down that it wasn’t them this time.

Antares reddened even more – he always felt guilty afterwards, but the things they did *were* funny...except when they happened to him. Antares sighed, heading thankfully for the Slytherin table, just managing to ignore a couple Hufflepuffs he passed that whispered “brain disease” at him. He soon found Blaise talking his head off (as usual) to an avidly listening Tracey – *when did she start sitting by us, anyway?* – and settled into the empty space beside his friend with a thump and another sigh.

“ – so that’s why Quirrel was so weird about it at the beginning. We weren’t really meant to have a demonstration from him in the first- oh hey, Antares,” Blaise said, pausing in his conversation with Tracey, “You all right?”

“Yeah,” was his slightly tired reply. “Just wish I didn’t have class after this, that’s all. Then I could catch my breath before that flying class, instead of hopping to for Mc-bloody-Gonagall or someone else – ”

“Antares, Blaise was just telling me about Quirrel – did he give you detention?” Antares stared at Tracey for a moment. He’d hardly heard her talk since the start of term, except during Quidditch arguments, which probably didn’t count, as she seemed to be a rather rabid fan –

“But why would he give Antares detention?” Daphne interrupted suddenly from beside him. “We were the ones that made him let us practice it, Antares was only – ”

“Actually, I was never supposed to demonstrate anything,” Antares interrupted, feeling sheepish as the three of them gave him an interested look. “I just made everything up.”

“Even the chapter?” Tracey said, sounding impressed. “Because it was the right one – ”

“It was?” Blaise said, grinning. “I didn’t even bother looking, I was whipping my wand out so fast – ”

“Sucks for Quirrel,” Daphne said, her grin matching Blaise’s. “He must’ve thought we had a real conspiracy going, he’ll probably be twitchy around us for the rest of the term, knowing him – ”

“Did you see how cornered he looked when Greg started arguing for the demonstration as well?”

Antares, now grinning along with the rest of them, made short work of his slightly malformed piece of shepherd’s pie while Blaise, Tracey and Daphne laughed over the various mistakes everyone had made with the Disarming Charm, feeling oddly content. It didn’t matter that he’d have to squeeze in a quick writing exercise with Professor Sinistra before rushing to the dreaded flying lesson – he was having another of those strange moments of feeling like he belonged here, and it was enough for the moment.

So he sat and laughed and joked along with them, ignoring Draco’s snide jokes about him being Quirrel’s little lackey (which fell rather flat anyway), and by the time he struggled off the bench, he was in high spirits.

“I’m off, then,” Antares said, smiling as Blaise continued to heatedly defend the rather wonky effect of his Disarming Charm. Blaise, and, interestingly, Daphne and Tracey nodded at him, ensuring that Antares left the Slytherin table feeling considerably better than he had when he’d approached it in the first place. Giving the Gryffindor table a wide berth (as the Weasley twins were holding court near the end of it), he headed for the dungeons with a leisurely stride, knowing well that he’d have more than enough time to get to his Apprenticeship class.

Avoiding the group of loudly debating seventh-years near the door, Antares managed to slip into his dormitory without attracting any unnecessary attention. He quickly sloughed off his schoolbag and attacked it, searching for a quill that wasn’t bent. Finding one took up most of the time he spent in the dormitory assembling the few materials he’d need for the next class, and he was soon on his way to the familiar classroom on the second floor, his small study book under his arm. This particular one was in an especially shabby condition, partly because this writing class (he’d checked, and been thankful his coming class wouldn’t be with McGonagall after all) was one of the last four he was going to have this term, and partly because it’d become a sort of inanimate magical guinea-pig to he and Blaise.

Antares smiled as he squashed the book into one of his larger robe pockets, taking care that none of it was visible to anyone that might look at him. Right now, it was a hideous shade of orange, and the first and last sheets of parchment in the book (well, in the sheaf of messily bound parchment, if you were really finicky) had an odd knobbly texture from the times he and Blaise had tried (and failed) to transfigure portions of them into cloth. It stood out even amongst the most brightly coloured textbooks in his bag, and its obviously personal nature was simply irresistible to any troublemaking or even slightly mischievous student Antares might meet in the corridors, so he often kept it out of sight.

*Besides*, Antares thought sheepishly, *there are all those horrible writing exercise things in it*. He grinned – the book was definitely the only school-issued material he'd ever inwardly vowed to burn, and could probably be the last –

Right, here he was. Wait –

Antares stared at the door, which wasn't opening. The handle, he thought confusedly, was absolutely not moving, which was weird, because he'd seen Professor Sinistra at breakfast that morning, and she'd clearly reminded him of the whole thing. After trying a tentative unlocking charm, Antares shrugged half in defeat, half in exhilaration. There was nothing like legitimately missing a class, after all...

Just as he was turning away, a little thrill of dread running through him as he remembered he'd wanted to read up on Quidditch just before his flying class, a neat little note appeared on the door. Antares, on closer, disappointed inspection, discovered it to be – he stared – in Professor Quirrel's handwriting. It read:

*Sinistra away on urgent family visit.*

*Class will be with me in DADA*

*classroom,*

*Quirrel.*

Antares sighed. *Why today, of all days?* He turned away from the door, irritated and not a little interested in just pretending he hadn't seen the note at all. While Quirrel wasn't the last person he'd want to watch him muddle through the writing exercises (that dubious honour belonged to the Headmaster, who he'd rather not speak to at all even on the best of days), Antares was still uncomfortable with the idea of being around the Professor because of the strange behaviour he'd displayed at the end of class not more than an hour ago.

However, as missing the rescheduled class was not really an option (however much he wished it was), Antares grudgingly set out for the DADA classroom, hoping that Quirrel was not in his office or *something* –

Consequently, he felt rather hard done by when the man actually appeared in front of the swiftly opening door as he made to knock. Antares started – it was almost as if Professor Quirrel had been waiting for him, or listening outside for his footsteps, or –

“C-c-come in, Mr. B-black,” stuttered Quirrel, looking interested, but in a thankfully non-detention-y way. “Sit d-down, please.”

Antares sat, as far away from Quirrel's desk as he could without looking like a loon, and duly extracted his orange book. “Shall I start, sir?”

“Start? W-what do you mean?” Quirrel said, looking oddly confused as Antares determinedly opened his writing book.

“My writing exercises, sir,” Antares said slowly, feeling unaccountably uneasy as Quirrel gave him one of those sharp looks again. He quashed the urge to scratch at his shoulder as it inconveniently began to itch and ache insistently, wondering why the professor was taking so long to –

“No,” Quirrel replied, sounding almost as decisive as the expression on his face. “Let's do s-something else, s-shall we? Something f-f-fun,” he continued, smiling nervously. Antares closed his book, trying not to look as unconvinced as he felt at that last suggestion. Fun, indeed – DADA classes were at the very bottom of any fun list of things to do Antares could come up with, and Quirrel himself was

close to the last person he'd expect to suggest such a thing without adequate persuasion – “Get your wand out, boy, and stand up.”

Antares stared for a moment before complying easily, feeling even more uneasy as he did so, despite the fact that he wasn't exactly powerless before this odd man should he abruptly decide Antares' punishment was to be some sort of trial by ordeal. Especially if he just swiped Quirrel's wand and broke it in two before he started running, or –

*Why the hell am I so paranoid just now?*

“I am going to t-t-teach you,” Quirrel said slowly, making Antares dearly want to roll his eyes and ask if that was why he was – surprise, a *teacher*. “Defence against the Dark Arts interests you, d-does it n-n-not?”

*Give the man a prize!* “Yes, sir,” Antares managed to say without sneering. *Where is this going –*

“Then y-you would l-like to practice some, w-w-w-wouldn't you? Some other s-spell, besides the Disarming Charm, perhaps?”

“Yes, sir,” Antares said, a little more slowly, wary excitement starting to blossom within him. Quirrel nodded slowly to himself, looking pleased, as if he hadn't already known Antares was interested in anything else other than bloody essays and stupid little questionnaires about vampires that asked information that everyone in his class already knew bits and pieces of –

“Then I will teach you s-some spells,” Quirrel said slowly, his frame taking on an oddly decisive slant. One that suited him a lot more than the ‘I'm a Stutterer! Don't Hurt me, Professor Snape!’ one that he seemed to carry around like a physical cloak – “The first,” Quirrel continued, stutter diminishing as he began to really speak about the spells, “shall be the Impediment Jinx...”

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About an hour later, Antares had all but forgotten his slight paranoia towards Quirrel, and was really enjoying the whole ‘I'll t-t-teach you spells’ deal. Sometimes, as he got overenthusiastic with one of them,

jinxing one of the desks so much that it actually wobbled onto its side, Quirrel gave him that already half-familiar, sharp look, as if noting something, but that didn't bother him.

For the first time, Antares felt wholly immersed in something he was learning in a way that only Charms ever seemed to do for him occasionally. It felt almost intoxicating, getting the *Locomotor* hex right on his first try, even though he wasn't quite able to do more than make the duster rise and move more than a few inches to the left. Which, when he thought about it, after watching it make the torturously slow journey across Quirrel's desk, was quite draining –

"How do I stop the spell, sir?" he ventured easily, poking gently at the still-moving duster as a highly pleased Quirrel looked on from his seat behind the desk.

"T-t-try the incantation *Locomotor mortis*," was the almost languid answer, causing Antares to give his professor a sharp look. *Mortis* – that sounded like it might mean death, or something. It sounded familiar, like the few Latin words Bella had had time to drum into his head to avoid –

"What does the incantation mean?"

"Ah, so suspicious, you young Slytherins," Quirrel muttered, his quill dancing an odd little pattern on a largish sheet of parchment he'd been paying attention to since Antares had started coaxing the duster into sluggish motion. "It is a variant of th-th-the *Locomotor* that allows the c-c-caster to make an object or b-being cease motion, magically i-i-induced or not. A-A-Also known as the Leg-L-locker Curse, as those are the articles it affects in most beings –"

Antares kept back a slightly relieved sigh, feeling foolish for even thinking it might mean Quirrel was trying to do him in. "So if I cast it on you, you wouldn't be able to walk?"

"Precisely." Quirrel waved the now-stationary quill his way. "G-go on."

"*Locomotor mortis*," Antares said easily, focusing as hard as he could on the stupid duster not falling off the desk, and – *that is so satisfying* – it did. It teetered on the right edge of Quirrel's desk for a minute and



fell anyway, but Antares easily caught it, suppressing the urge to draw it to his hand as he usually did with most falling objects in private. "Here's your duster back, sir..."

"And here," Quirrel said, presenting him the large sheet of parchment he'd evidently been scribbling on, "A t-t-tidy little r-reference, of s-sorts, for today's lesson." He gestured magnanimously in Antares' direction as he took it. "I added one or t-t-two m-more for your s-study. F-F-Feel f-free to c-come by with any q-q-q-questions you might have, Black. Off you go."

"Thanks, sir." Antares rose to his feet, feeling oddly energised from just seeing the 'one or t-t-two more', which was actually six, on the parchment. He paused for a moment, meaning to thank Quirrel for teaching him, and, more importantly, for not punishing him.

Unfortunately, that wasn't quite what came out. "Thanks sir. Are you going to test me on them? I mean," Antares added hastily, knowing that could be taken entirely the wrong way, "Will I demonstrate them, or anything? Or is this just for my own – "

"Heavens no," Quirrel said amiably, his smile a little less nervous than it had been at the start of the little lesson. "Mostly for your own study, I should th-think. If you are to d-d-demonstrate anything, I will inform you the next time we practice."

"We'll do this again?" Antares couldn't help saying. Quirrel nodded, ignoring how he blushed at being so – so swotty. Antares picked up his writing book and, after absently folding and tucking the parchment away into it, hastily stuffed it away, ignoring the ache in his shoulder as he sort of fidgeted in front of Quirrel, wondering whether it was polite to thank him again (it felt like he had, somehow) or not.

The impolite, grasping side of him won (because Quirrel might actually remember to give him another bloody lesson if he did), almost without a fight.

"Thanks again, sir. Er. Bye." Antares headed out of the office, just narrowly managing to clamp down on the impulse to apologise for his disturbance in class that morning. If Quirrel didn't want to remember it, then he had no business trying to bring it up each time, especially if it

might mean that Quirrel wouldn't practice spells with him any more. At that thought, Antares couldn't help straightening just a little, walking a little taller. As silly as it probably was to be gratified at being told to study, he just felt privileged, somehow, that Quirrel thought he was good enough to learn directly from him –

"Antares, is that you?" Antares jumped at the sound of Tracey's disembodied voice, coming from so close in front of him. He went slowly around the corner, and felt stupidly relieved that she was actually there, looking dishevelled and rather impatient. "Where've you been? Our flying lesson's been going on for fifteen minutes, and you haven't – "

"What?" Antares looked at his dirty little watch, and paled. Shite – he'd been occupied with Quirrel for *thirty minutes* longer than his normal study period – "Oh gosh, must've lost track of the time – "

"While studying?" Tracey said, tugging him after her towards the front hall. "When you can be *flying*?"

"I don't fly," Antares said dazedly, dread seizing abrupt hold of him again. "Do we have to?" Tracey goggled at him, but didn't let go as they darted out into the courtyard and began to hurry in the direction of what Antares assumed must be the Quidditch pitch.

"Of course we have to," she seemed to settle for, making it sound like he was refusing to breathe or something. "To think that Madame Hooch sent me off for you – what a waste of time..." she muttered, ignoring how Antares stiffened as they approached what looked like a small swarm of students in the air. "She's in the grey robes, alright? Just grab up a broom, say 'up', and go tell her you're here – "

"Where are you going?"

"Flying," Tracey snapped, rolling her eyes at him, and then she was darting fearlessly into the space under the ragged swarm of black robes that Antares knew were students, and retrieving one of the last few non-ragged brooms that lay in a scattered pile beside a shapeless little mound of cloth Antares recognised as some sort of detachable cloak hood, and doing just that. Her kick-off was a little

jerky, but so obviously miles better than anything Antares would be able to produce in his fright, and he was just so nervous –

“Look, everyone, the peasant’s arrived!” Antares’ heart stilled sharply within him as he unwillingly began to make his way towards the pile of brooms, Draco’s contemptuous voice and the resulting giggles washing over him like a rain of stinging needles. “See – even the brooms don’t like him!” And it seemed horrifyingly true – the broom in his hand was almost wriggling, as if trying to get away from him, to join its counterparts in the air free of the constraint of a pathetic flyer like him –

“Quiet, Mr. Malfoy!” the strident, no-nonsense voice of the woman who Antares numbly thought must be Madam Hooch cut through the laughing of the rest of the class like the cold feeling was doing through his ability to speak and defend himself. “Three points from Slytherin for your tardiness, Mr. Black, Apprentice or no. I don’t tolerate stragglers, you understand?” A fierce-looking, hawk like woman thudded down to the ground beside him. “Having trouble? Shed your robes, if it will make you feel a little less encumbered.”

Antares wordlessly did so, ignoring the way he had to keep a tight grip on the broom as he stepped a little way away from the slightly muddy little pile of his shabby robes. “Now, set your broom on the ground, and call ‘up’ –” But Antares was hardly listening to her terse, yet patient instruction, because Draco was whooping and streaking down from the steady circuit of nervous students flitting about above them.

“Look at me, everyone!” Everyone looked, including Hooch, because you could hardly help it, he was that good, that fluid, and –

Antares stared –

– obviously heading for his robes. And his book –

No –

Before Antares could form a coherent thought, before he could even think to reach out and somehow snatch his stuff away, Draco had swiped the muddy little bundle and was shaking out everything onto

the grass as he rose higher amid the laughter of everyone except for Madame Hooch, who was blowing on a whistle and fiercely demanding Draco get down *at once*, which wasn't doing a bit of difference because Draco now had his hands on his book and was –

“ – listen up, everyone! Wait till you hear what Peasant Boy does in his study period – ”

“*Give that back!*” Antares could somehow hear himself shouting, somewhere in the distance, even as the broom sprang hard into his hand, as if it already knew his desperate intention. And then Antares was up in the air, cutting fiercely through the loud laughter and the absolute humiliation of hearing Draco read his horrible exercises out loud, and he wasn't quite sure what he was going to do apart from make. Him. Pay. “*Impedimenta!*”

The angry, shaky Impediment Jinx was not nearly enough to do more than wobble Draco's broom slightly in the air, but it finally made him pay attention to the spiralling, blindingly angry Antares below him, which was exactly what he wanted –

“Do you have a problem with me reading this, Black?” Draco was taunting, swirling higher, taking the bloody book out of Antares' grasp with a simple lift and soar, and it was maddening, so maddening – “Come and take it, Peasant Boy!”

Antares let go then, lowering himself to the broom, trusting it entirely, letting it circle higher and higher after the now-slightly-nervous Draco, who seemed to realise what Antares was doing almost at the last moment, only managing to duck out of his way as Antares shot at him like an angry black arrow, whipping around and dogging Draco's heels, following him as he twisted in the air. Antares matched him move for move, indignation and adrenaline spurring him on in the air, the desire to make the blonde bastard pay heavily outweighing his fear of falling, his morbid fear that he just wouldn't ever be good enough.

Because the last fear, he realised, as Draco faced him, apprehension and calculation in his eyes, was proving to be almost irrelevant –

“I’m tired of you following me, you stinking peasant,” Draco said, almost conversationally, tossing the book up in the air. “You can have your stupid little book, for all I care – ”

But Antares wasn’t listening to him anymore, was just streaking past him after the fluttering, arcing little spot of orange, because he’d suddenly remembered that the parchment that Quirrel had given him was inside, and he wasn’t letting that go, letting that crumple to nothing on the wet grass beneath them or flutter away in the slight wind, as long as this broom behaved and his legs behaved and the air seemed to ally itself with him. The angry shouts of Madame Hooch and the gasps and screams of everyone else dissolved into nothing but Antares in the air and Antares on the broom, diving after the parchment gently tugging free of the falling book, and it all came together in his ears, the air whistling past him sounding like an odd, incoherent sort of music as he passed the book nearing the ground, every pore of his body calling out to that whistling, fluttering piece of slightly damp parchment, and –

He felt his hand close on it, squashing it, saving it, and then and only *then* did he let his reflexes take him curving away from the grass rushing up to meet him, weathering the way his body seemed to spiral in on itself with the sheer force of his turn, slowing down as the broom slowed down between his legs. Antares found himself half flung onto the grass as the book thudded to the ground some ten feet away from him, and despite the fact that it hurt, felt fiercely victorious.

“You crazy child,” Madame Hooch’s voice said, from somewhere that seemed far away, “Could have been killed – ”

“He took my stuff,” Antares said weakly, feeling like that was very important to make sure she knew. “He took my – ”

“And you dived after a piece of *parchment*,” she sighed, becoming a huge grey blob above him as his eyelids started to droop from the resurging pain in his shoulder, which seemed to be travelling down into the hand that was clutching said parchment. The blob shifted before his eyes as her voice told someone to get Ponry and Snip, and Antares, after thinking for a moment, managed to reach out and pat

the broom that was still somehow beside him, in thanks for a job well done.

"Thanks," was the last thing he heard himself say, before the welcoming sensation of sleep overtook him, and his eyelids closed entirely.

The broom had had a part in his victory, after all.

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*A/N: Dear Lord, thanks for helping me finish this. Really, people, I don't know why this chapter had me so stuck, but it did. Sorry about the cliffie, as usual. All I'll tell you is that he isn't dead. Obviously. I mean, how would I be able to write fifth year then?*

*Sorry for any mistakes or whatnot, but I'm too fed up of looking at this darn chapter and worrying about perfection to look at it one more time. Hope you enjoyed it (it had more than one serious sticking point for me, that's all I'll say), E.M.*

*Oh, and I know I haven't answered any reviews lately. I'll get round to it straight after this, so...yeah.*

### **Chapter 13: The Duel Forsworn**

Antares opened his eyes again for what seemed like the hundredth time, wincing as the light around him seemed to bend oddly. He hazarded a long look around, and, after examining the high, pale ceiling and breathing deeply of the sterile, relentlessly clean scent around him, decided he was in the Hospital Wing.

And not a moment too soon, because a stern woman had suddenly appeared on his left, and was brandishing a wand with the firmness and direction of someone with authority. Antares winced in surprise as the first spell hit him, tensing out of habit, then relaxed as one or two vaguely familiar diagnostic spells washed over him, as keen and oddly refreshing as the woman's sharp look.

"A Black, are you?" she said suddenly, lowering her wand. As soon as Antares nodded, she began to tut and move away, looking highly disapproving. "Should have known – recklessness as I have never been able to understand – diving after *parchment* – "

"It was stolen from me," Antares said indignantly, thankful that his voice seemed to be normal, making sure that the Matron (whom the woman obviously was) was quite far across from him before trying to sit up and succeeding. "It was important – "

"Pah! Everything's important at your age, I'll wager," was the stern answer. Antares shrugged slightly, careful not to strain himself in case of – but there were no injuries. He allowed himself a small, triumphant grin. Despite his fear of flying and what he sheepishly knew now to be a rather blind, panicky attempt at some sort of wacky heroism, he'd definitely landed all right in the end, and evidently hadn't done anything stupid to himself.

And besides, he thought he might have conquered his fear of heights into the bargain, which was really fantastic –

"What do you think you're doing?" Antares started and stilled, and was already half off the bed before the Matron had turned on him, looking extremely fierce. "You get back onto that bed this minute, Mr. Black – I'm not finished with you yet – "

“But I feel fine,” Antares argued, getting up and stretching his arms and legs, which felt a little sore but otherwise fine. “And I’ve got this essay – ”

“Sit. Down.” She intoned, turning back to the desk and cupboard of potions and other unpleasant-looking instruments that Antares rather preferred to be well away from. “The burn salve will be ready in just a moment, Mr. Black, and you are not to leave without it.”

“Burn salve? I don’t need any – ”

“Of course you do! If someone had treated that fat set of scars on your back properly at the actual time you received them,” the woman gave him a hard look, not far from the one Snape had given him upon examining them for the first time, “then you wouldn’t be displaying them like some sort of hideous mascot right this moment, you silly thing,” she said, waving away his objection. “Now, if you’ll just sit down – ”

“Poppy? Is he awake?” Antares stiffened almost without thinking at the sound of Snape’s voice, a probably unfounded trickle of fear running down his back. Snape strode into sight, shutting the door firmly after him with a twist of his wand and not much more, the expression on his face a strange mixture of irritation and excitement. “Ah, I see.”

“Just about to administer some burn salve, Severus,” Poppy whatever-her-name-was said in airy reply, causing Antares to shift uncomfortably under her determined gaze. “Have you seen these?”

“You mean the cloth-like patch on his back that is extremely hard to miss, Madame Pomfrey?” Snape replied, laying the sarcasm on thick as he stopped at the foot of the bed Antares had been lying on, looking somewhat amused. “Oh, I’ve noticed that – his mother informed me that it is permanent, and sadly his cross to bear.” Antares confined his glare to his knees as Madame Pomfrey (as that was obviously her name) tutted and fussed him back into his robes, complaining about flying lessons all the way. Antares, after a slightly feeble comeback of his on the merits of Quidditch in general was denounced by Pomfrey and rather obviously sneered at by Snape,



decided to keep his mouth shut, his head down, and get out of the bloody Hospital Wing as fast as possible.

“Not so fast, Black – follow me.” Antares stifled a resigned sigh, and tried not to hesitate more than was necessary. Right now, he really just wanted to go to bed – “It is past your dinner time, Black,” Snape continued, slowing his stride slightly, as if to make sure Antares heard him properly. “You will follow me down to my office and have your supper there, and we will talk.” Antares’ breath hitched slightly as he stole a look at Snape’s face – the expression on it was excited in a way he’d sworn he’d never see on the dour man’s pasty face, and – “Stop dawdling, Black! I know very well that you are not injured in the least, so hurry up.”

Antares groaned inwardly and did as he was asked, wondering what on earth Snape could want to talk to him about.

Then it hit him. Antares straightened slightly as they began to head down for the dungeons, now partly oblivious to the curious, slightly sympathetic looks he was getting being marched down by Professor Snape. The parchment Quirrel had made for him hadn’t been nearby, like his robes, and – he conducted a quick, hopefully not too noticeable search for it in his pockets – not among the string and quills and small fragments of parchment. He stared up at Snape again – that could only mean that –

“Now, here we are,” Snape muttered under his breath, making one or two quick motions with his wand before opening the classroom door, “Inside, Black. Now.” Antares didn’t need telling twice, and only had a moment to catch sight of the empty, slightly larger desks and take notice of the still air in the room before Snape had sat him down firmly in front of the large teachers’ desk and begun to glare at him. Silence stretched around them in the stale, cold air of the classroom. It made Antares unaccountably nervous.

“Now, Antares,” Snape said, sounding very calm and very calculating, “you will tell me why you were so stupid as to risk your neck for a sheet of parchment. Which,” he went on, cutting off Antares before he could even speak in reply, “has been confiscated, and will be in my

care until you elaborate on how such a useless item could entrance you into such gross folly.”

“Sir,” Antares began, as earnestly as possible, but Snape was already cutting him off again, the excited look coming back to his expression.

“Of course, you’ll be joining the Quidditch team in your second year – right at the opportune moment, even, when that blackguard *fool* of a Terrence Higgs finally tears himself away – ”

“Sir?” Antares’ eyes widened of their own volition as he tried to process what Snape had just said. “Me, on the Quidditch team?” Snape, paused in the act of pacing distractedly in the space between Antares’ perch and the teachers’ desk, gave him a look that was almost indignant.

“Hooch nearly wet herself watching you, you imbecile, and certainly not from fear,” Snape said impatiently, beginning to pace again, slower. “And of course, your housemates saw everything. Anyone with a modicum of sense would know that you belonged on a broom – probably born on one. I really shall have to inform Bella of the identity of your parents – not hard to guess, is it, with that natural talent – ”

“I’ll be on the Quidditch team in second year?” Antares repeated, trying to get this one thing solidly confirmed, heart beating uncomfortably hard in his chest. “But – I’m actually afraid of heights – ”

“Afraid? Of *heights*?” Snape began to laugh, a little unpleasantly. “Then may all the members of our current team be terrified of them henceforth.” Antares reddened, and tried hard not to puff up with pride. He had to have been good, to be practically promised a place on the Quidditch team next year, and for Snape to be muttering excitedly to himself in that manner – “You do know, of course,” Snape said, finally leaning against the large desk opposite Antares, “that Professor McGonagall will be furious.”

“Why?” Antares asked, feeling a little stupid, but very, very good all the same. Snape gave him a slightly savage grin.

“Well, the Quidditch Cup is Slytherin’s for the rest of your school career, obviously,” came the slightly amused answer. “Should help to speed up your climb of the social ladder very nicely, I assume.”

Antares nodded, trying not to split his face with the grin that was threatening to break free. “Thank you, sir. Erm – the parchment – ”

“ – is among your things, in your dorm,” Snape replied almost automatically, staring a little absently into space, making Antares narrow his eyes at him. You really never could trust what the man said, could you? “Oh, and Black? See that you report to Flint for the preliminary Quidditch meeting in a week. You will go to every Quidditch-related meeting, practice and discussion, or I will wring your neck myself, understood?” Antares nodded emphatically, and, when Snape sighed, beginning to stare off into space with a very smug look on his face, decided it was as good as any time to take his leave.

“Where do you think you are going?” Snape snapped, as he got up. “You haven’t had your supper – ”

“I’m not that hungry – ”

“You will sit and eat, *now*,” Snape said, cutting him off with a diffident look. “I have no intention of letting you starve yourself here, Black, not if you’ll need your health for next year,” Snape rose and dusted off his robes unnecessarily. “Wait here, I will contact the kitchen.” Antares sighed and sat down again, watching Snape disappear out of the classroom with a sort of tired curiosity. He was a little hungry, after all.

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When Antares returned to his dormitory some time later, he realised that the uncomfortable half-hour spent eating under Snape’s absent, excited gaze had done rather well to prepare him for the speculative looks and whispering that followed his entrance into the common room a little after curfew. Blaise was immediately by his side, all nerves and angry looks in Draco’s direction as he filled in Antares on what had happened after his occasionally swooning body had been Levitated off the Quidditch Pitch.

“It was really weird, you know? I mean, Hooch was really, really angry, and still she’d sort of an absent expression on,” Blaise said, glaring rather ineffectively at anyone who leaned closer or came over to the corner of the common room they were sitting in. “You could tell she was just dying to know how you’d gotten so good at flying, and everything – ”

“Antares? Are you okay?” Antares jumped a little at the overly indifferent tone of Tracey’s abrupt question, which had him twitching round to see where exactly she was. Blaise scowled at her, as he had a habit of doing to anyone who interrupted him, and Antares gave her a quick nod, still interested in what Blaise had to say. A minute later, he was thinking so hard about everything that had happened today that he hardly noticed that Tracey had returned to her seat nearer the fire until a looming, burly, somehow familiar fifth year took her place just behind Antares, whose chair was turned a little haphazardly in Blaise’s direction.

“Zabini, stand up and let me have a word with Black,” the fifth year said decisively, the impassive look on his slightly trollish face one of such clear authority that Blaise was rising out of his chair before the fifth year could say anything else. “I’m Marcus Flint, and might soon be responsible for the training of your stupid arse. And Zabini, I never said you could hang about. Scarper, now.” Flint’s eyes were brown and hard as they flicked over Antares’ nervous frame, and they didn’t even bother glancing Blaise’s way as he hurriedly backed away from the corner they were in. “Stand up, will you?” Antares stood hastily, recognising well enough the implicit threat behind every word, backed up by the sheer size of Flint’s muscular frame, which was on a slightly larger scale than Greg’s, who Antares thought was plenty intimidating even at eleven. Flint eyed him up and down appraisingly, ending his odd little perusal of Antares’ short, thin body with a nod that somehow seemed to mean he could sit down. “Pre-practice is in a week. Pucey will let you know.”

Antares sat down in a rush of relief, feeling a little like he’d passed some sort of test. Blaise returned as soon as Flint had stalked back over to his usual belligerent position near the common room door, igniting another spark of recognition in Antares. That was why his face was familiar – he was forever sitting near the entrance to the

common room, in the company of one or two other male and female fifth years that gave off the same alarmingly aggressive air as he did.

“So,” Blaise said, settling back into his chair, his expression as unchanged as if Flint had merely come over to say hello, “What did he say?” Antares let a cautious grin slip onto his face, and settled down to gossip over the new information as excitedly as he could seem without looking like a complete idiot in front of the entire room.

“He said something about pre-practice...”

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“So you get to go to the Quidditch practices?” Tracey asked timidly. Antares nodded happily, ignoring the way the conversation around them reduced and finally ground to a grudge-heavy halt. It had been doing that ever since he’d returned to his dorm and found Draco playing a childish kicking game with his school bag and books, and Antares had made sure to attract the attention of Flint and one of his cronies, who, in a supreme stroke of luck, had been going down to their own dorm. Flint had sneered at both him and Draco and told them to buck up and had not been much of a help at all, but he’d provided the necessary distraction for Antares to seize his books and things back and pretend to curse them with an exaggerated charm that he gleefully told Draco would turn his skin orange for the rest of the week if he touched them again. Draco had scoffed, but had gone to bed almost immediately, and Antares hadn’t been able to resist teasing Draco about his obsession with his appearance.

Draco had set Greg on him (Vince already being asleep by that time), and Antares, who had just been secretly referring to his recovered, and thankfully not too stained parchment, had used the Impediment Jinx to slow him into tripping over the trunk at the foot of Blaise’s bed. Greg had groggily returned to his bed in a huff, and Draco had done the same thing, obviously seething at Antares’ breezy insults.

It had all been extremely satisfying, and had therefore put Antares in quite a good mood. Which meant he answered Tracey without the irritation that came from having several second years pester him all rather obviously on purpose in the common room earlier with the same question she’d asked. Antares smiled a little derisively, not

really caring that he still didn't know why they'd done that – second years were notorious for being mean to first years, and that was enough to imply that they'd got some kind of stupid enjoyment out of solemnly forcing him to stay in the common room while asking him if he was going to the Slytherin Quidditch practices fifteen times.

*Oh, right, my answer.*

“Professor Snape actually threatened me – really told me he'd wring my neck and all that, if I didn't go,” he said, trying hard to keep the dreamy tone out of his voice, and hoping he wasn't failing too badly. Blaise gave him a grin that was slightly tinged with malice, and Antares returned it, already able to feel the comeback the nearby Draco was aching to make. “As if I needed a reason to go – ”

“No one cares, Black,” Draco finally spat, from nearby. Antares gave him a shit-eating grin, raising his goblet to him in a mocking gesture.

“I didn't think you did, Draco,” he replied, a little too loudly, and Blaise began to make stifled, laughing noises that got Draco glaring at him too. “Thanks for reminding me, though – I never would have known – ”

Draco thumped down his cutlery and struggled off the bench with a quiet snarl, followed by a very obviously reluctant Vince. Greg sighed nearby and began to lob some rolls and sausages into a napkin, and that finally set Antares off. He set down his goblet, as he didn't want to spill pumpkin juice over himself (it was horribly hard to get out of robes with normal cleaning charms, and despite the fact that he knew the house-elves here would probably welcome the task, couldn't bring himself to subject them to a round of complex washing and cleaning charms), placed his head in his hands and practically cried with laughter for the next two minutes.

This enjoyable moment, unfortunately, would not last for long.

“Antares! Antares, look!” Blaise elbowed him hard in the back, making him sit up hard and vow to do the same at some point later in the day. Antares wiped the corner of one eye, scowled at the body of his friend, then looked round to see a sight that would undoubtedly replace the sheer bliss he'd just been experiencing moments ago.

Draco was standing between the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables, his way blocked by a slightly-menacing-but-not-quite-that-menacing Neville Lupin and Ron Weasley. Neville was speaking to him lowly, a hard expression on his usually rather soft, irritatingly cheerful-looking face, and Draco was sneering and looking him up and down and fidgeting with his wand in what he obviously thought was a menacing manner. As soon as Vince reached Draco, Draco pointed sharply to him, and both he and Lupin argued briefly before nodding and glaring at each other as they all headed off for the exit, both of them conspicuously staying as far apart as they could.

Antares' eyes narrowed. If he didn't know better, he would have said those two had just agreed on something. Which was so unlikely as to be completely stupid, so...

"I wonder what they were talking about," Tracey said curiously, turning a little pink as Antares looked back at her in slight irritation.

"Yeah, thanks for stating the obvious – Blaise, do you know anyone in Ravenclaw?"

Blaise looked back at him, tearing his gaze away from the exiting Draco and Lupin with some effort. "Yeah, why?"

"Well, some of them have to have heard what those two were nattering about," Antares said briskly, lips twitching with slightly malicious glee as he ran through the possibilities in his head. He dug briefly under the table, retrieving his schoolbag and slipping off the bench. "Let's go find out, shall we?" Blaise seemed to hesitate for a moment, looking back at Tracey, who had somehow gone even pinker. Antares rolled his eyes to himself as Blaise slipped off the bench, his own bag in tow, and followed him. Girls – sometimes, they really seemed weird in the head, blushing and crying at the drop of a hat, even ones he'd normally think better of, like Tracey. Antares shook his head as Blaise led him down to the first year end of the Ravenclaw table.

"Hey, Boot," Blaise said, pausing behind a group of boys that seemed to be poring over something on the table. The light-haired one looked round and up a little impatiently, a bit of a scowl on his face until he

saw Blaise, whereupon it deepened into an even bigger scowl. "How's life?"

"Going fine until you showed up," Boot said a little darkly, turning round to face Antares and Blaise properly. "Going to give me some more exploding candy?"

"Come on, Terry, it was just one," Blaise said easily, ignoring the slightly narrowed looks he was getting from Terry's companions, one with dark hair and a rather pointy face, and the other with brown hair and the irritatingly student-y look Antares often saw on some of the worse Ravenclaws' faces. "And besides, don't you want to know why Draco's so angry?"

"What for?" Terry said, perking up. "Oh, right, he just accepted a challenge to a duel from – "

"You're joking," Antares couldn't help interrupting, feeling like the holidays had come early. "Where? When?"

"They were really quiet about it, so Anthony didn't hear any more," Terry said easily, ignoring the glare from his student-y-looking friend. "Wish I could watch, though – "

"Draco and Lupin," Blaise was still saying to himself, his bag seeming to slip off his shoulder and onto the floor nearly of its own volition, "a duel to bloody remember, I'd say – "

"Watch your filthy mouth, you arse," Antares said companionably, elbowing Blaise in the ribs and smiling nastily when his friend scowled at him. "Well I can't have teachers blaming me for corrupting you, can I?"

"You know, I don't think we've met," Terry said, giving Antares an appraising look and rather suddenly extending his hand. "Terrence Boot, call me Terry." Antares dropped his bag nearby, mimicking Blaise, and shook his hand a little dubiously, feeling odd.

"Er, I think you already know my name," he managed to say, brow furrowing as Terry let go of his hand and continued to stare at him and Bl – no, just at him.



“Yeah, what does it mean?” Terry’s friends were now no longer pretending to ignore the conversation going on behind them, and were listening rather closely, as was Blaise. Which made Antares nervous – he’d never liked people looking at him for too long.

“Uh – my mum told me it meant ‘rival of Mars’, or something. She’s weird about names, I think,” was his perfectly simple reply, one that certainly didn’t warrant the student-y friend of Terry’s letting out a low, triumphant exclamation and sticking out his tongue at Terry. “Er – ”

“Will you be paying up now, or later?” Studenty Student was saying smugly in Terry’s scowling direction. “Oh don’t you start – it’s not my fault you can’t remember anything about constellations – ”

“Shut up, Tony,” Terry said defiantly, turning away from his crowing friend to give Blaise a tired look. “You were saying, about Draco being angry...?”

“He was ragging Antares in Flying class, right,” Blaise said, obviously settling down to tell what he seemed to think was a good story, “Giving him a hard time, and all that, you know? Then he takes Antares’ piece of parchment, flies away with it, and Antares here just goes *mad* – ”

“All I did was get it back, Blaise,” Antares said, interrupting, mostly because he thought he’d look too much like a preening idiot if he didn’t say something to counter the rather, well, lofty retelling of the whole episode. “And Madame Hooch’s probably still going to punish me for hexing Draco in the air – ”

“You hexed him? I didn’t see that – ”

“Get on with it, will you?” Terry said impatiently, looking at his watch and after the people already streaming out of the Hall. “We’ve got Potions in ten, so please – ”

“Calm down, calm down – so Antares hexes him, and it doesn’t do anything – ”

“Beg to differ,” Antares muttered, “I did slow him down a bit – ”

“Right, you slowed down a heavily charmed broom with standard anti-stop protections on it,” Student-y – or, rather, Anthony said, rolling his eyes derisively. Antares scowled at him, feeling irritated. He’d been trying to bloody well downplay the whole thing, and this idiot was just being stupid about some arbitrary detail –

“I didn’t say I stopped it, did I? I’m not stupid, I know you can’t stop the motion of a broom, thank you very much – ”

“Would you let him talk, please?” Terry interrupted, sounding even more impatient. “Go on, Blaise.”

“So Antares decides he’ll just knock Draco off his broom instead, yeah? And he almost did, too – he was faster on that old broom than anyone else up there, see? And then – ”

“For goodness’ sake, Blaise! All I did was chase him for a bit until he dropped the parchment,” Antares said, sighing irritably. Couldn’t his friend see that the last thing Terry and company wanted to hear about was his foolish heroics? “He dropped it, I dived, I caught it. End of story.”

“That still doesn’t tell me why Draco looked like he was going to have a fit,” Terry pointed out in a sensible tone of voice, looking oddly interested as Antares fought an involuntary blush. “Why, then?”

“Because Antares here is so good at ‘catching parchment’,” Blaise said, clearly relishing the thought as well as the sarcastic rendition of Antares’ really rather obvious downplaying of his talent, “that he gets threatened into watching Quidditch practice for the rest of the year by Professor Snape, *and* gets an automatic in on the team next year, no question.” Terry’s eyes widened, as did those of his friends.

“Well I can definitely understand Draco, then,” Terry said, making to stand up. Blaise stepped back, giving Antares an uncomfortably proud look as Terry, Anthony and their dark-haired friend rose from the table all at once. “I’d be jealous as hell, too...”

“Snape didn’t give me an automatic in, though – well, not nearly in so many words or anything,” Antares said companionably, fighting back a blush as they all began to approach the double doors of the Hall. It

was just so odd, being eyed by Terry and his friends as if he had something they were jealous of –

“Antares, first years haven’t been allowed on the pitch during Slytherin Quidditch practice since Flint got captain, and it was Snape that made him do it,” Blaise said, giving him a knowing look. “I’d say ‘watch practice or I’ll hex you’ is about as automatically in as you get, thanks.” Terry gave Antares a slightly superior smile and wave as he and his friends split off towards the staircase that led into the dungeons, and as soon as they’d descended into it, Blaise nudged him sharply. “Don’t go down on yourself like that again, you idiot – you know everyone’s too eager to help you do that, don’t you?”

“I just don’t see why they’re that jealous of me,” Antares replied, feeling oddly sheepish as he adjusted the strap of his bag on his shoulder. “I mean, I know Quidditch is big here, obviously, but – ”

“Antares, saying ‘Quidditch is big’ here doesn’t cover it,” Blaise interrupted. “Half the reason why people constantly talk up that Diggory in Hufflepuff is because he plays Quidditch. My step-father knows his dad, and he told me Diggory’s also a bloody good dancer, but no one mentions that.” He sighed slightly. “And then there’s you – you’re poor, you come from an unknown family, and yet you can probably out-fly anyone in this school with training. *And* you’re smart, and a whiz at magic – what’s not to be jealous of?”

“Well, now that you put it that way...” Antares mused, screwing up his face in a parody of thoughtfulness. He paused for a moment as Blaise continued on his amused way, then began to mimic Draco’s swagger with slightly shoddy, over-the-top additions. Blaise burst out laughing almost immediately and easily fell into the somewhat lazy stride, and by the time they arrived at the Charms classroom, they were both a little late and very out of breath. All that laughing, really – Antares had never known how funny a sneer like Draco’s could look on his friend’s face.

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“He isn’t going to go?” was all Antares could say, the sheer surprise of what Blaise had just mockingly whispered to him robbing him of words. “But that’s so – ”

“Cowardly? Stupid? Take your pick,” Blaise said diffidently, darting an amused glance in Draco’s direction. They were all currently in the common room again, all of the first years working hard on a ghastly set of homework exercises from the lesson McGonagall had just let loose on them half an hour ago. Draco was at the desk he’d somehow managed to monopolise on sight as his since the first day of term (an action that made Antares all the more jealous when no one seemed to bother to give him a hard time about it), and was whispering about something with Greg and Vince, the look on his face extremely smug.

“How’d you find out, Blaise?” Antares asked, crossing out yet another potential solution to the irritating problem they were both trying to work on. Merlin’s balls, but his hand hurt – McGonagall seemed to be able to set the most confusing logic puzzles, honestly –

“Daphne heard Pansy laughing at Draco saying he’d just tell Filch that Lupin and Weasley’ll be sneaking around on the third floor tonight,” was Blaise’s slightly absent reply. He bent over the textbook again, brow furrowing as he re-read the question. “Which obviously means he’s not going.”

“But he swore,” Antares said, thinking hard. “Didn’t they? It’s really bad luck to swear like that and not follow through – ”

“It’s hardly like he swore on his magic or anything, Antares,” Blaise said, rolling his eyes as he began to scratch out another possible solution on the messy, rapidly filling parchment they were sharing. “It wouldn’t even be a serious duel, anyway – ”

“Well we’ll never find out now, will we?” Antares said impatiently. “That’s so – ”

“What d’you mean, ‘we’? You’re the one that wanted to sneak off and watch,” Blaise accused falsely, ignoring Antares’ glare as he scribbled faster. Blaise had been just as excited as him after Charms, when Antares had overheard Draco talking to Greg about getting to the third floor without being noticed and immediately thought of following the would-be duellists out and hiding so he and Blaise could watch the (probably disastrous) duel. Antares rolled his eyes, flexing his tired fingers around his quill as Blaise continued to scribble. He

tried to ease his irritation and boredom by digging out his wand and Levitating the open *Beginner's Guide to Transfiguration*, and assumed an innocent look when it dropped heavily onto Blaise's hand.

Blaise glared. "Could you actually help me with this, Antares? It's not like you've done the assignment already – "

"But I'm so *bored*," Antares grumbled. "This school sometimes – I just want some bloody excitement, for once. You've never seen a real duel before, so you wouldn't understand – "

"But it wouldn't *be* a real duel, Antares," Blaise said impatiently. "The most Draco knows how to do is the Jelly-Legs, and he can't even get it to work properly."

"So? I'll bet that Lupin knows a few things," Antares went on heedlessly. "Probably put Draco firmly in his place – and by in his place, I mean on his arse, crying for his – "

"Excuse me?" an unwelcome voice drawled from nearby. "Nothing? Oh, I thought I heard a halfblood say my name – "

"And why the hell not?" Antares retorted coolly, winking at a surprised Blaise beside him. "You're obviously a coward, Malfoy, so I'll say your name how and when I like – "

"Take that back, or I'll make you!"

"And by 'make me', you mean Vince and Greg'll make me, don't you? Pity you don't know how to use your wand...maybe that's why you're not going for that duel with Lupin. Face it, Malfoy, you're *scared* – "

An angry hand seized at the neck of his robes from behind, and Antares rose sharply, dropping the quill he'd only just been chewing on in favour of his wand. Draco's hold on him loosened, most likely in surprise – the idiot probably knew very well that he wasn't quite able to lift Antares up like that, and Antares was resoundingly glad for it. He spun round, shoving Draco hard, and, knowing Greg and Vince would come by as soon as that happened, shoved him again, ensuring he tumbled backwards into one of the three low tables like the one he and Blaise had been sitting at.

He'd scarcely had time to grin at Draco's look of panic before another much stronger hand grabbed a handful of his robes and hauled him backwards. Antares twisted sharply, ignoring the ripping sounds on one shoulder as Greg tried to keep hold of him, and by the time Vince had reached them, he was able to kick Greg in the shins and duck out of the way. He headed straight for the common room door, stifling a hysterical laugh as he heard Greg and Vince coming after him as Draco shouted that he was running away like the coward he was, and was soon through it and heading immediately down the hallway in the direction of the older, unused dungeons. Greg and Vince would expect him to run in the other direction, as it was a shorter, more certain way to Snape's office and classrooms, and the other way, which he was heading now, was seldom used by any students who might be able to rescue him. Antares barely had a moment to squeeze into an alcove around the corner before he heard the thumping footsteps of his peers thunder out, pause and...he sighed with relief...head in the opposite direction.

Antares grinned, letting his head fall back against the cold, damp stone. Now, if Draco didn't go for the duel, he'd *really* be able to call him a coward.

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Antares jolted awake, stifling irritable cursing at the origin of the noises around him only just in time as he remembered why he'd made sure to sleep without the slight dampening effect of having his curtains closed. He lay still in his bed, feigning sleep as Draco chivvied Greg and Vince into wakefulness and robes, silencing their groggy protests as to the change of plans by saying something vague and cocky about him knowing he could give Lupin what for.

Antares barely restrained a snicker at that – 'what for' indeed. The only reason he was going was because he was an idiot, and easily excitable, and perhaps secretly thought he was a coward for not wanting to face Lupin. Which Antares could understand, but couldn't help feeling scornful of – Lupin or no Lupin, a truly brave or truly cowardly Draco would never have bothered to listen to his taunts in the first place, much less change his plans at the last moment. He closed his eyes as Draco and company went past his bed (*no sense*

*in not being careful*), wondering briefly if Draco had told Filch about the whole thing anyway.

But no, Blaise would have seen, or heard, and would have told him on his sneaky return to their dorm just after lights out. And he hadn't, so that was that. Antares counted to fifty before sliding silently out of his bed and tiptoeing over to Blaise's, his feet feeling horribly cold even against the carpet on the floor. Now was the time to wake him and set off, of course – he didn't want to lose track of Draco after setting all this up.

"Blaise?" Antares kept his whisper as low as possible as he gently parted his friend's tightly closed bed curtains. Blaise didn't so much as sniff or move as Antares poked him gently with his outstretched wand – a move that usually had Bella up and seizing it from him and berating him for taking her wand again. He'd done that a lot when he was young – it was always warm in his fingers, smooth and a little worn, a little like his mother's skin.

Well, this wasn't working. Maybe he just had to be a bit louder, or something –

"Blaise? *Blaise?*" When louder whispers failed to get a response, Antares began to poke his sleeping friend as hard as he could, reserving nothing when Blaise finally turned over and mumbled something incoherent. Antares paused then, as he thought Theo might be awake for a long, suspicious minute, and rolled his eyes when he poked Blaise again, cautiously, and saw that the rustling noise was just Blaise kicking under his blanket.

He sighed. Drastic measures would have to be taken, seeing as Blaise would take it as high betrayal if he was left behind. So after a couple of quick, paranoid looks around the half-empty dormitory, Antares whispered a Stinging Hex as lowly as possible, wand pointing directly at Blaise's visible stretch of dark neck. The results were distressingly good – Blaise jolted awake with a panicked, sleepy look on his face, and had got out half of a half-hearted yelp before Antares had thought to clap his wand hand clumsily over his mouth.

"Shut up!" he hissed, thankful that Blaise wasn't half as paranoid as him or, even worse, his mother. Anyone waking her up in that manner

would probably have gotten a foot in the shoulder and perhaps a good hex or two before they knew what was happening. But Blaise was not Antares, and therefore the only sort of punishment Antares got was a rather nasty look and a painful twist to the wrist when Blaise shoved him away.

“What’d you do that for?” Blaise hissed, sitting up slowly. Antares rolled his eyes.

“You sleep like the dead, Blaise; that was the only way I could think of using to wake you up.”

“With a Stinging Hex?” Blaise gave him a hard look as Antares stepped back to allow him to lumber out of bed. “Where do you learn all those, anyway? D’they have some kind of ‘How to be a mean pig’ class as part of your apprenticeship, or something?”

“Next time, I’ll just leave you,” Antares whispered, grinning. He turned back to his own bed, now searching for the pile of threadbare robes he’d shoved underneath it earlier that evening for the purposes of their little expedition.

“Like I said, you obviously have one of those classes,” Blaise grumbled lowly, but from the noises Antares could hear as he quickly dug around in his trunk for his softer pair of boots, he too was struggling to find his robes. “I take it Draco and the others have gone already?”

“Yeah. They woke me up, actually,” Antares said, sitting on the bed and starting to draw on his thickest pair of socks. Noticing the thin-looking shoes a robed Blaise was now putting on, he sighed. “Blaise, you can’t wear fucking slippers around the castle, you’ll freeze – ”

“They’re night-boots, Antares – charmed warm, you know?” Antares shrugged. If his friend wanted his feet to freeze, he wasn’t going to stop him. “They’re from my mum,” Blaise continued, fishing up a jumper that was dangling messily from the foot of his bed, “for Hogwarts, for my eleventh birthday and all that. She always said they were the best for sneaking around, so...” Antares nodded impatiently, now fighting a pang of jealousy – it would be someone like Blaise who knew all those things and had all those things –



“Are you putting that on?” he said, suddenly noticing how Blaise was tugging on the thick jumper over his robes. “You look like an idiot, why aren’t you putting it on under your – ”

“It won’t fit, it’s too thick,” Blaise answered, voice muffled through the jumper as he pulled it over his head. “It smells like my great-aunt (horrible old woman, she always gives them to us at New Year), and it’s too thick to go under *anything*, but is really warm. So – are you ready?”

“Merlin, yesterday,” Antares said, rolling his eyes, feeling increasingly jealous. All he had was Bella, and, since they were living in his house, Severus. Oh, and some weird old woman Bella sometimes dragged him along to visit in what felt like the coldest part of Scotland, but she wasn’t family. Blaise was constantly complaining about numerous Great-Aunts and Grandfathers and Uncles, but never seemed to understand how much more interesting it was to actually have more than one person you shared the same bloody name with. Antares sometimes wondered whether he did have family somewhere – he didn’t know who his biological parents were, after all, and they could be part of a family like the Weasleys, with cousins and aunts coming out of the woodwork. But now was obviously not the time to go mooning on about it. “Can we go?”

Blaise simply rolled his eyes at him and set off for the door. Antares followed, shaking his head – Blaise was weird like that, blowing hot and cold, aggressive first and passive at the next turn. You never knew quite what he was thinking, or, more significantly, what he was thinking of doing. It had made life in Slytherin that much more interesting, being friends with someone so unafraid of doing whatever they wished, with no reservation or fear. Or at least very little of it.

The door closed behind them with an audible click, and Antares’ blood began to heat, sparking off impatience and excitement in his limbs as his chest seemed to contract. He grinned at Blaise, not caring what response he would get, because this was it – the beginning of their adventure. Blaise gave him a slightly superior smile, then, creeping down the corridor past the other doors to the dorms of the older boys, stumbled over something. Antares barely stifled a laugh, thanking Morgana that the corridor was truly empty. Blaise

grinned stupidly as they crept out into the main corridor, and the little Antares could see of his friend's expression hinted at his feeling the way the heavy silence seemed to press on them. Their footsteps were muffled by the thick carpet underfoot, and the silence seemed to wrap around them both, like a thick, cool cloak. Antares sighed – there was something about being alone and out at night here, different from the same in Knockturn Ally, and he knew he was going to love it.

Unfortunately, they would not be alone for long. Just as Antares and Blaise left the corridor connecting the dormitories to the common room, Blaise bumped into someone.

“Shut up!” was the whisper on Antares' lips even before Blaise or the person he'd bumped into could gasp, curse or anything. “Look – ”

“Antares?” Antares blinked, leaving hold of the slightly soft arm of the person, who sounded oddly like –

“Keep your voice down, Tracey,” Blaise said excitedly, his own voice suitably low. “We're going out, just – ”

“What?” Tracey whispered, at the same time as Antares pinched Blaise, hard. “Why?”

“The duel,” Blaise continued, ignoring Antares' glare, “Draco's going to get hexed within an inch of his stupid life, and we're going to watch!”

“Oh, smart going, Blaise,” Antares muttered at him, just able to see the puzzlement on Tracey's face change to curious excitement. “Now she's going to want to come – ”

“What?” Blaise said, his tone rising defensively. “She's sneaky, and her brother told her how to get past Snape's rooms without waking him up...”

“Did he?” Antares asked, swivelling towards her abruptly. At Tracey's excited, slightly wide-eyed nod, he sighed. “Fine. But if Filch comes, it's every man for himself, got it?” Tracey nodded immediately, looking nonplussed, and Antares' opinion of her rose by a fraction. He

preferred people who could take care of themselves and didn't have a problem doing so in a heartbeat. It meant less to worry about, especially on a jaunt like this, where being caught would mean House points and possibly a horrid detention with Filch wheezing over them for an hour. "Right, then. Do you have a robe on, or something?"

"My nightgown," Tracey whispered, looking at him a little shyly. "Look, if you don't want me to come – "

"No, you'll be useful," Antares said, starting to feel a tiny bit guilty. He'd never really told her he didn't care about the whole broom thing, had he? Well, now wasn't quite the time, but – "And stop looking at me like I'm going to hex you, all right? To be honest, I think the whole thing with the brooms will be the best thing that happens to me all year." The slight tension between the three of them seemed to disappear with that, and Antares tried not to notice Blaise's surprised smile. Perhaps this had been the right time to say that, then. "Except maybe for the duel we're going to watch – Draco'll really get his arse handed to him, I'll wager." Tracey snickered, pulling her nightgown tighter around herself. "So, can we go?"

"No, Antares, let's go back to bed," Blaise teased lowly as one by one, they tiptoed through the common room. "Really – "

"Shut up, Blaise," Antares said, stifling a grin. "And really, you two, I'm not looking to get caught. If something happens, I'll just – "

"Yeah, right," Blaise said, sounding curiously on the verge of laughter. "As if you'd leave us for Filch, you heroic twat – "

"I highly doubt telling him that will incline him to rescue you, you know," said an amused voice from frighteningly nearby, causing Antares to jump before he remembered who it was.

"Hey, Rufus," Antares said, grinning at Blaise's slightly cross look. Rufus nodded at him negligently, feigning disapproval as Blaise paused to listen at the door next to the portrait Rufus was lounging in – he remembered being told by Adrian that Rufus was the most devious Slytherin Head Boy in recent history, and had had his portrait hung next to the exit of their common room to keep an eye on the comings and goings of Slytherins sneaking out. Unfortunately for

whoever had had such a silly idea, Rufus simply lounged there round the clock, occasionally nipping out to flirt with the portrait of an equally famous Slytherin Head Girl (*Norma something*, Antares thought. He couldn't really remember, as she was in the hallway leading to the girls' dorms, and he'd never bothered to go that way for anything more than a curious look around). Rufus spied on everyone leaving the common room unabashedly, but never seemed to tell anyone with the authority to stop the goings-on, as nothing ever happened to you if he saw you sneaking out. Luckily for some, he also never told anyone where anyone else was going (sometimes because he liked to know more than anyone else, but mostly because no one with any sense discussed their, er, destination in front of him), and dearly loved to mislead you if you asked.

Or so Adrian had said. Antares, being out after hours for the first time in his Hogwarts career, was hardly likely to know if that was all bull or not. Rufus, however, seemed to fit the detailed description Adrian had given him so far, eyeing all of them shrewdly and looking very smug as they clustered around the common room door nearby.

"Sneaking out, I presume? To do what?" Antares shook his head, smiling as Blaise began to cautiously slide the common room door open. "Two boys and a girl, and far too young for anything...interesting," Rufus continued, smiling a little knowingly at Antares, who reddened. Eurgh, the idea of doing anything of that stuff with *Tracey* and *Blaise*...well, he didn't have so much a problem with Tracey as with Blaise, but that was hardly the point – "And you stopped to chat, too! Can't be on some kind of schedule, can you? Doing a bit of shadowing, maybe? Ooh, let me guess what group you're following – "

"The Malfoy one," Tracey said impatiently, giving the two boys bewildered looks as they gave her brief stares. "What? He asked, and I told him." Antares suppressed a grin at Rufus' irritated expression, privately thinking it served him right.

"You're supposed to let him guess, Tracey," Blaise said, causing Antares to give him a curious look. "What? My mum told me all about him, said he'd just been put up in her second year, I think. I don't know if she knew him personally, but..." He shrugged as they went

through the door, stopping to close the door after them. “We’d better get a move on, you know; Draco might be losing already – ”

Antares and Tracey heartily agreed, and they all continued to snicker and make up silly poses Draco could be hexed into by now as quietly as they could.

“So, third floor, yeah?” Tracey asked, after a particularly funny one from Blaise. They were now in a stairwell that led as far up as the fifth floor (from what Antares could remember from one sleepy, slightly desperate morning that had him searching for a classroom on the fifth floor instead of the second), and would soon be getting out on the third floor. Blaise nodded, grinning in anticipation as they cautiously approached and opened the door.

“Yeah, in one of the classrooms near that corridor that was blocked off – ”

“Shut up!” Antares hissed suddenly, hoping against hope that he wasn’t seeing Mrs. Norris streak by in front of them as they stepped out. He didn’t have to say it again as he saw Draco, Vince and Greg burst out of a classroom not a door away from the stairs and begin to run directly for them, looking shaken and panicked – “Merlin, what the – ” Blaise and Tracey, spun round, eyes wide with dismay, already following Antares’ meagre lead by thundering back down the stairs in the direction they came, Tracey well ahead of Blaise, leaving Antares to descend as best as he could with Greg and Vince trying to squeeze past him.

“Belt up and clear out of the way!” Draco was practically shouting, having reached the stairwell last. True to form, Greg and Vince, before merely content to shove Antares out of the way, eventually squeezed his wildly struggling form into a tiny alcove just behind the door, rapidly acquainting his face and arms with the rough, cold stone. It hurt, but not as much as hearing the telltale huffing and puffing of Filch nearby as Draco clambered clumsily down the stairs ahead of him. Antares had prised himself out of the alcove as soon as the idiot was past and was doing the best that he could. But, as being winded and having your arm feel as if someone had crushed it (which wasn’t

far from the truth) tended to give one rather a disadvantage, Filch had spotted him and was now in dogged pursuit.

Antares sped down, ignoring the pain in his shoulder. He hadn't grown up on Knockturn for nothing, and being a natural runner helped immensely, giving him enough speed to stay more than a healthy distance away from Filch as he alternately cursed and threatened him from behind. Blood thudded in his ears, and he swore he could distinctly hear Bella telling him it was no good being seen in the event of an escape. He somehow shoved the idea of detention and punishment out of his mind as he slammed open the door at the end of the stairs and burst out onto the first floor, picking up speed as he thudded down the corridor to the back entrance of the stairs that led down to the dungeons and to safety. Blaise and Tracey were nowhere in sight, thankfully, lending him courage and even more speed as he barrelled down the stairs, knowing he could make it to the dorms in time if he just –

*Fuck!*

Antares saw the dark form of someone he just *knew* would be Snape cross his path, and cursed out loud as his momentum carried him straight into them. Snape's potion-y smell hit him like a thundercloud as the obviously startled man staggered back under his assault, and Antares felt himself land hard on the floor even as Filch's wheezing came closer.

"Miserable little maggot, leading me on such a chase," he heard soon enough, the words punctuated with very Filch-like wheezing and coughing sounding not far from them. "Ah, Professor –"

"What is the meaning of this, Black?" Snape's frigid tone sent a shiver down Antares' back as he, trying to rise, was hauled roughly to his feet by a hard grip on the injured shoulder. Antares closed his eyes in part miserly and part anger – this had been such a hopeless night – "Speak up, you imbecile, or –"

"Or else *what?*" Antares hissed back, the anger starting to win. "I just half-kill myself running into you, and you can't even help me up properly –"

“Excuse me?” Snape’s tone was, if possible, even colder. Antares couldn’t find it in himself to care – it was all he could do to tamp down on the rage within him, rage against Draco, because it was his fault, and he was so fucking tired of tiptoeing round him, and he. Would. Pay.

Silence strained around the three of them for a moment, punctuated oddly by the wheezing of the approaching Filch, who, though practically vibrating with the expectation of seeing a student severely punished, probably knew enough of Snape’s moods to keep silent. Antares abruptly decided he couldn’t afford to, and opened his mouth to speak. “Please accept my apology, sir,” he said, as slowly as possible, gulping down his anger. “I – I didn’t think, and I think I fell on the shoulder you’re holding, and it hurts – ”

“And?” Antares did not look up, a new bolt of fear running through his stomach. The man sounded angry enough not to care if Filch truly fulfilled one of his stupidly outrageous threats – “Is that reason to show your profound lack of respect?” Snape continued, voice dangerously low. He let Antares go abruptly, gesturing sparsely towards a nearby door Antares assumed was one of the dungeon classrooms, or something – “Get your worthless little hide in there and wait for me. Now.” His tone brooked no argument, and Antares shuffled quickly for the door, dread pooling horribly in his gut.

“But Professor, sir – ” Antares heard Filch beginning behind him. He closed the door hastily, leaning back against it briefly, heart pounding in his ears even harder than it had been when he’d been dashing to –

“Antares!” Antares jumped, whipped out his wand, then stared. Blaise started up from the chair he’d been sitting in in a dark corner of the classroom, looking relieved. “Snape got you, then?”

“What?” was all Antares could think to say. “Where’s Tracey?”

“We split off on the first floor,” Blaise said, sighing as he sat down again. “Probably took that way past Snape’s rooms she was talking about – I ran into him on my way past, and – ”

“Then why’s he still here?” Antares said, his fear diminishing significantly. It was starting to look like –

"Well, I sort of mentioned you'd be coming by," Blaise said matter-of-factly, his tone of voice belying his slightly embarrassed look. "Did he get you, or did Filch?"

"He did," Antares answered, now heading for Blaise's side, "I think he's trying to convince Filch he'll punish me long and hard, now..." He sat down heavily, massaging his wounded shoulder. "Thanks a lot, Blaise."

"Whatever," Blaise said in an unconvincingly nonchalant manner. "What happened to your – "

The door opened, and both boys stiffened as Snape strode in, looking as displeased as usual. Antares tried not to notice how Blaise sat up straight, as he was doing the very same thing and it would therefore be pointless to mock Blaise later for doing so, as fleetingly crossed his mind. He prudently lowered his eyes to the floor as Snape glared at him, then, for some reason, noticed that Snape was wearing night-boots of the same type as Blaise.

"I suppose I should punish you," Snape murmured, leaning stiffly against the door.

"Yes, sir," Blaise said beside Antares, his voice the very sound of respect. Antares fought the urge to pinch him, hard – what kind of imbecile agreed to an undefined punishment from Snape?

"Black," Snape continued, in that same low tone, "you seem...reluctant to speak."

"If you're going to take points, go ahead," Antares said coldly, wishing he felt as bravely indifferent as his voice sounded. "We didn't go out on purpose to get caught – "

"And yet, you did," Snape said, with an oddly wry twist to his tone. "Oh, look up, the two of you, I've no time for such dramatics." Antares looked up in surprise, and saw Blaise slowly do the same out of the corner of his eye. "I suppose it is only to be expected, as you two are on your first foray...be sure it does not happen again, of course. Next time, I will hardly be so lenient."



“Thank you, sir,” Blaise said, voice still respectful, and Antares had the sense to echo it. Snape’s face twitched oddly, but his rather bored frown still held.

“Just get out,” was their answer. Antares and Blaise rose at the same time, and waited for Snape to step aside from the position of blocking the door. “A moment – Black, what ails you?”

“It’s nothing – ”

“*Decouvere mala*,” Snape intoned, obviously indifferent to Antares’ denial of injury. Blue light seemed to pulsate around his shoulder, and Antares gulped, recognising the spell his mother had often used on him every time he returned from playing outside with a limp. He shook the odd, constricting feeling off with a shiver, and, as Snape rolled his eyes and raised his wand again, wondered what that oddly calculating expression he’d seen briefly in those dark eyes meant. Then his shoulder was tingling, a little uncomfortably, and the pain going down. “Don’t condescend to conceal your injuries from me, you idiot,” Snape said, tone firm. “Now go to bed, the both of you.” Antares was the first one out the door, the feelings of both gratitude and anger constricting oddly inside – Snape was just *weird*, sometimes – “Oh, and Black?”

Antares turned back with a barely suppressed snarl, making Blaise jump. “What, sir?” he managed to say without spitting. Snape emerged from the classroom slowly, and gave him a cool, assessing look that he just knew was somehow upbraiding him for the anger he was probably going to let loose back in Slytherin.

“That letter to your mother, boy?” Antares groaned inwardly, trying not to fidget with embarrassment as he felt Blaise give them a very interested look. “It is a week late. Get on with it, understand? If it’s not on my desk by tomorrow evening, you may serve some kind of punishment after all.” Antares’ mouth opened and closed soundlessly for a minute. “Didn’t I tell the both of you to go to bed?” Antares practically fled then, Blaise hard after him, feeling Snape’s hard eyes on him as they disappeared round the corner.

“Does he know your mother?” was the first thing Blaise mumbled in his direction. Antares shook his head, not quite wanting to say anything yet. “But how can he – ”

“Fine. Yes, he does.” Antares glared at his friend. “Happy?”

“Well, I just thought it was a bit odd, that’s all,” Blaise pointed out in a very sensible whisper. “I mean, why would he care if you wrote to – ”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care,” Antares returned, ignoring Blaise’s shrewd look. “I really don’t, all right? I just – look, after he found me in Knockturn, we stayed with him for a bit. Greasy bastard – ”

“Wait, he found you?”

“He was the one that recommended me for the apprenticeship, you idiot,” Antares said, trying to hurry up the whole stupid conversation. If there was anyone he didn’t want to know about him and Bella’s circumstances, it was Blaise. “Of course he was the one who found me.”

“You never told me he put you up for it specifically,” Blaise pointed out, voice just as low and reasonable as always. Antares rolled his eyes, wishing he’d never opened his mouth – he forgot, sometimes, how persistent Blaise could be when he wanted to know something. “And what does your mum think about it?”

“What?” Antares stared at him, unconsciously slowing his pace. “Well, she’s obviously grateful, but I don’t see – ”

“Oh, come on,” Blaise said, rolling his own eyes with a knowing look, “You’re trying to tell me he just makes sure you write to her out of duty, or something?”

“He doesn’t really care either way, Blaise,” Antares sighed. “He just likes winding me up, and that doesn’t mean anything. You know how he is.”

“Okay, let me try and put this – right,” Blaise said, voice thoughtful. “Have they ever been friends? You know – Snape and your mum?”

“Sort of,” Antares replied, cautiously. From everything his mum had told him about Death Eaters, they were hardly very friendly with each other. And anyway when they’d met Severus that first, fateful time in the Leaky Cauldron, his mum had looked absolutely terrified. “Not very close, I think.”

“And now they are?”

“Merlin, Blaise, they’re adults that happened to share the same house at one point! They *talk*, yeah, they laugh too – sometimes at me! It doesn’t mean anything,” Antares added, lowering his voice even more as he and Blaise approached the blank stretch of stone that hid their common room door. He was unable to hold back a sigh of relief: they’d gotten lost once, on the way back just before curfew, during the week when the torches had been put out after a botched experiment by some idiot in sixth year – ended up shouting the password at Professor Snape’s own hidden door to his rooms, but – yeah. “And honestly, him and my mum?” Antares shook his head. “As poor as we are, even I know she’s way out of his league.”

Blaise shrugged, looking rather unconvinced. “Suit yourself,” he whispered. Antares, ignoring him, whispered the password, and the door slid silently open. To his mingled disappointment and relief, everyone in their dormitory seemed to be fast asleep once more. As Antares couldn’t see why Draco would be pretending to be asleep since Greg and Vince were in the dorm and conveniently on hand for a fight, he had to content himself with outlining a plan of sneaky action by wand light behind his curtains, and fell asleep with a grim smile on his face.

Paying Draco back, if he did it right, would be wonderfully enjoyable.

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*A/N: Aaaand we’re back on-line! Sorry this has taken so long, fellas – hope you enjoy my efforts as much as I enjoyed employing them towards the end. I’m definitely not a hundred percent positive about some of my choices for characterisation and various portrayals of people in this chapter, but am (lazily) willing to let things stand as they are. I’m also unsure as to how on earth this chapter got so darn long, but hey – all to the good. I’m also unsure (repetition ahoy) as to*

*what my fave moment in this chapter was – Flint’s cool appraisal of Antares and Severus’ barely restrained delight vie equally for my attention, as does the interesting inter-House moment smack bang in the middle of everything. How about you guys? Do tell.*

*All thanks are due to my faithful reviewers and to Snakeling, who ensured my cries for help would never be heard again by giving me a handy reference to canon. Oh, and to all the countless essays and things I’ve been reading for the past month or so, which I’d like to believe have given me a clearer perception of how matters shall stand in the rest of my fic.*

*Next chapter: Halloween The First*

## **Chapter 14: Halloween The First**

Weeks after the whole incident in the flying lesson and the not-duel that followed it, Antares was starting to tire of hiding Draco's things. Unable to think of how to corner the little bastard and hit him until he bled (which was Antares' most natural inclination as regarded paying someone back for nasty things they did) without immediate retribution from Greg and Vince, he'd taken to filching Draco's things. It was almost too easy to squirrel away his handsome brown quill and to take only the important pages or sections out of Draco's parchment notes, or to hide his stupid soft breeches or vests at the foot of Greg's bed or even drape it on Draco's bedposts when he felt like it. What resulted from Antares' sneaky tactics was a lot of hysteria on the part of Draco, who, after trying to pretend nothing was going on, had searched each and every one of the beds, night tables and trunks in their dorm in search of the tools of the criminal who kept taking his things.

That had been one of the most satisfying moments Antares had had in a long time, as he knew very well that the only tool he needed to steal anything from Draco was his hands and a little malicious will to push his magic in the right direction. Antares had kept a straight face for the entire duration of the search, then rushed to the shower room for a long bout of near-hysterical laughter. Blaise had come in soon after, to see if he was okay, and had ended up joining in when Antares hinted that he'd been behind the whole thing.

Antares scowled. Of course, Blaise being Blaise, he'd gone right to trying to find out how Antares had done it, and had been bothering him ever since.

"Morning!" came the bright voice of his friend, through the curtains around Antares' bed. "Happy Halloween, Antares – "

"Put a sock in it, Zabini!" came Draco's muffled, sleepily annoyed voice. "Some of us are trying to sleep, you idiot – "

"At eight in the morning? Really smart timing, Draco," Blaise replied sarcastically. Antares flexed his fingers and snatched the balls he'd been deftly juggling (he'd gotten quite good at it now, actually) out of

the air as a familiar pair of dark hands tore the curtains at the foot of his bed open. "Antares, wake – oh. You're up, then."

"I'm *always* up, Blaise," Antares replied, a little testily, sliding off his bed with a thump as Blaise scowled and went off to Greg's bed nearby. "And what the hell is wrong with you, anyway? They can wake up on their own."

"Not for a pillow fight, they can't," Blaise said enthusiastically, tearing open Greg's curtains to a grunt of dismay. "If they wake up now, we can have a really good one."

"Why on earth do you want to have a pillow fight?" Draco said from the foot of his own bed, sounding bewildered as he watched Blaise bully Vince into wakefulness but made no move to stop him.

"It's *Halloween*, you idiot – it's tradition for everyone to have a pillow fight before they go down for breakfast, to scare the ghosts. Didn't your dad tell you?"

"Of course not," Draco replied, trying to look scandalised, but failing to look anything but quite curious. "He'd never fight people with pillows –"

"Well, he should have, then – it's so much fun! Ted, wake up –"

"Go away," Ted moaned, but Blaise was relentless, practically pulling him out of bed. Ted struggled manfully, and was very awake by the time Blaise had gotten him to the floor, and very annoyed. "What's your problem?"

"Halloween, for goodness' sake! Defend yourself!" To Antares' surprise, Ted surged to his feet and claimed a beaten-up pillow from his bed.

"It'll be my pleasure, you arse – you didn't have to drag me out of bed –"

"Ted, what are you *doing*?" Draco demanded, but Ted was already hitting a retreating Blaise soundly over the head with his pillow. "Ted –" Laughing, Blaise managed to snatch a pillow from Vince's bed

and try to defend himself against Ted's hard, puffing blows. "Greg, what are you doing?"

"My mum told me about it," Greg said, stuffing a couple of pillows plundered from Draco's bed under his arm and claiming a third from his own bed, and...heading happily in Antares' direction. "Oh, go on, it's fun, Vince won't let Ted hit you too ha-ow!"

Antares smothered a grin, sitting back on the nest of pillows he'd quickly amassed on the other, defensible side of his bed. His mum had called this strategy of hitting back before you were hit something, something long and a little weird –

"I'll get you for that, Black!" Greg said fiercely, Draco's nerves forgotten as he advanced menacingly on Antares' bed, a light sprinkling of feathers blending oddly into his striped white-and-green pyjamas.

"Whatever you say, Greg," Antares called back, grinning as he prepared to strike from under his bed – *aha, that was it – pre-empty strike* – "Boo!"

"Wha-ow!"

"Vince, don't hit me!"

"Defend yourself, Draco – "

"Out of my way, Ted – "

"Black, you son of a – "

"Complete that nicely, or I'll wash out your mouth with feathers!"

"Blaise, what's your bloody problem – "

"Aw, fuck, Greg, those were *mine* – "

"No worries, you can have them *back*!"

"You slimy stupid fuck – "

“Tell that to the floor, Black.” Greg stalked away, all over feathers and clutching three or four pillows as he went to Draco’s rescue. Antares sat up, rubbing at the soon-to-be-a-lump on the back of his head as he surveyed the chaos their dormitory had sunk to. Blaise and Ted were pummelling Draco unmercifully in the corner between Ted and Vince’s beds. Greg was trying to go to Draco’s rescue, and forgetting the point as Vince happily attacked him. Antares couldn’t help but laugh – even his short-lived stand had been fun. He rose up and jumped over Blaise’s messy bed, snatching up a lonely pillow from between his bed and Draco’s and had started to head around Greg and Vince’s titanic struggle when the whole fight ended with a very satisfying:

“Yield! I yield, you – stop hitting me, Blaise!” Blaise and Ted ignored Draco’s slightly plaintive, panicky shout, but Greg and Vince did not, and soon everyone was huffing and puffing and sitting or leaning against something, and thoroughly covered in itchy feathers.

“Wow, that was fun,” Ted was just saying, as Blaise made his weary way back to his bed. Antares looked up at the clock as he began to make his way back to his bed as well, and suddenly noticed –

“Fuck, it’s twenty to nine!”

The dorm dissolved into chaos once more, only this time a chaos of people tearing out of their clothes and tugging on jumpers and stuffing feet in boots and trying manfully to rid their hair of feathers (Draco, of course), all so quickly that three minutes later, they were all heading down to the Great Hall in a red-faced, wide-eyed, still feathered group. The Great Hall was nearing empty at the moment, but thankfully the Slytherin table was still rather full, and the food hadn’t disappeared down to the kitchen. When Antares drew nearer, he saw that quite a few of those at their table were boys, and were just as messily dressed as he and his year mates were, and one or two of them had feathers or fluff in their hair or on their robes.

“Hey, Black! Stop here a minute, will you?” Antares stopped, grinning, because the person who had just called him over was Adrian, and Adrian was absolutely *covered* in feathers. “Make a joke about my appearance and you’ll look exactly the same for the whole day,



understand?" Someone equally covered in feathers grumbled and stood, and began to walk away as other boys near him laughed. "See? Terrence did, and see how marvellous he looks this morning."

"What's up, then?" Antares said, nodding gratefully when Adrian gestured to an empty seat opposite him. Adrian brushed a hand through his hair negligently, somehow not displacing even one feather as he continued to attack his small plate of eggs. "We can't be having Quidditch practice tonight, can we?" Antares continued, a little curl of worry blooming inside him as he started to gather together enough things to make a hasty sandwich. Adrian and Charles had been ecstatic (and, in Adrian's case, rather smug, because he'd won an improbable bet on the whole thing) to hear of his being destined for the Slytherin Quidditch team, and had been the ones to inform him of practice times and locations ever since his fateful flying lesson.

The first practice had been held in the common room, oddly enough, but had flown by as Flint and Terrence Higgs, their current Seeker, had argued over Antares' presence there and generally fought about the strategies Flint wanted to practice and use for the season. The others had mostly been held outside on the Quidditch pitch, and had usually ended in Antares being unable to feel either his feet or his fingers because he was supposed to stay on the ground and watch Higgs' moves throughout. Antares had found the practices absorbing all the same, especially on the rare occasion that Higgs or Flint bullied him onto a broom and made him try out some of the standard Seeker moves and argued about things on the ground while Antares gloried quietly in his presence in the air. By the time the first Quidditch match had been announced, he'd grown used to picking out weaknesses in the Slytherin line-up and occasionally volunteering what he thought to Flint in a very respectful tone (if there was anyone who hated disrespect, it was Marcus Flint), and flying on command, if a little jerkily.

"Of course not," was Adrian's sharp, slightly incredulous answer. "Flint might be a hard man to work with, but he's not stupid enough to try to push us around while everyone else's feasting inside, you know."

Antares shrugged, bolting down his food as quickly as possible. “Just – asking.” Adrian gave him an irritated look as he resumed tucking into a horribly messy, slightly feather-y sandwich before him. “So...ulp...what’s up?”

“He just wants you to give his condolences to the Greengrass girl in your year, Black,” Charles said abruptly from nearby, frowning deeply at his watch as he stood. His own outfit was the nearest to immaculate that Antares had seen so far, with a few patches of white clinging gently to his collar. “And mine, as well.”

“Why, though?” Antares asked, wrinkling his nose. He’d barely even seen Daphne at breakfast, actually. Although that was probably because he’d been so late down –

“Don’t be a ninny,” Adrian snapped, like he always did when he wanted someone to do something. “Just tell her we give her our formal condolences, all right?”

Charles looked amused as he dug his bag out from under the table. “No need to snip him just because I remembered it first, Adrian.”

“Do me a favour and suck yourself off, you girl’s tit,” Adrian replied absently, snaffling an extra roll from Antares’ plate as he stood up. “Tell her, Antares.”

“Whatever,” Antares said, shrugging. Sometimes the two of them were pretty close to mad, always bursting upon him with strange advice and ordering him to do things. Since they were friends (and much better at drawing star charts than him), he almost always did what they wanted, and did so with relish, sometimes. It had been for Charles that he’d stolen the stupid brown quill from Draco, actually, and Adrian had suggested the work of art that had been Draco’s crazily disarranged green sheets about three days ago. Of course, he always tried to find out their reasons for asking him to do weirder things, and balked if the task was stupid or just stupidly mean, or likely to get him into trouble.

Right now, despite his suspicion, Antares really couldn’t see the point of not conveying formal condolences to Daphne for them – if they knew something horrid had happened to her or to her family, they

were well within their rights to send them through him. In fact, if he remembered correctly, that was exactly what family friends or acquaintances were supposed to do – discreetly send condolences through a friend or peer of the person in question.

So, as he, Blaise and the rest of his dorm squeezed hurriedly into the Charms classroom and scrabbled for seats as Flitwick, as usual, took no notice of their lateness except to take points, Antares contrived to brush by Daphne's seat next to Pansy, and contrived to drop his things just so, so that he could tell her now before he forgot.

"Pucey and Warrington send their condolences, Daphne," he muttered quickly, gathering together the few books that had slipped out of his bag as he'd dropped it. However, when he looked up, Daphne's face had gone pale, and her lip was trembling. A Crying Sign if he'd ever seen one, and he really didn't understand why simple condolences affected her so much. "You all right?" But Daphne stared straight at her hands, lip still trembling, back stiffening, and Flitwick's squeaky voice rang out behind him.

"Mr. Black, I require your assistance! We will need the eagle feathers as well, please, and be quick about it!" Antares sighed, hastily dropping his schoolbag next to Blaise's seat a few desks away before going off in search of said eagle feathers. If he remembered correctly, they were doing some kind of theory comparison thing, studying just why different feathers and hence, different objects, levitated in different ways. It had been very interesting work when he'd gone over it on his own with Flitwick hovering excitedly nearby, but if Antares knew anything, he knew it would result in unfailingly tiresome mistakes among the class, and several fires being put out.

Not that it was Flitwick's fault. Charms was just like that as a subject – disordered, disorganised and full of possible and possibly dangerous mistakes for stupid students to make. That fact didn't take away from the many interesting parts of Charms, but it definitely made Antares' life as an Apprentice that much more difficult. Antares, having found the right box in Flitwick's distressingly neat, slightly low-ceilinged little office, entered the classroom to find everyone listening to the professor.

“...mechanics of a Levitation charm are strong enough to accommodate all levels of power. Why, Heroditus was well known for his outrageous ability with Levitation charms – he was said to have been the highest paid architect at the time, because of his ability to levitate in several thousand tonnes of building material and manipulate them into place, all with a sequence of very powerful modified charms. Some of those are still used today in Egypt...” Antares tuned out the familiar lecture, trying to be as quiet as possible as he parcelled out two eagle feathers and as well as two of the other kind to each desk. Towards the back, some pairs who were chatting would very obviously stop as soon as he came towards them, but Antares ignored it, having gotten very used to being given wary glances from most of the Hufflepuffs.

The only person that upset him slightly by not looking him in the eye was Hannah Abbot, who he’d always made a conscious effort to set at ease in these classes because she was prone to making mistakes and freezing up at bad moments, but then, that might have been because Tracey was sitting next to her and scowling over at Blaise, who was carrying on a surprisingly amiable conversation with Justin Finch-Fletchley, who, if Antares remembered correctly, had gone to school with a distant snooty cousin of his whose parents had turned their nose up at sending him to the usual small wizarding primary school, opting instead for the large, famous Muggle private ones.

Antares turned away and continued to distribute the feathers, a small grin coming to his face. He had had a good private laugh over Blaise’s scornful indignation on behalf of the horribly exclusive wizarding primary school he’d been to, as he had rather strong memories of one or two times a group of very articulate snobby little boys had tried to bully him and a sometime friend at one of the poor public primary schools Bella had once been able to get him into. The boys had known (in a seven-year-old Antares’ estimation) a frightening amount of insults and naughty words, and had been more frightening to him than the usual weirdoes he met in Knockturn or elsewhere because he hadn’t known what they wanted or why they’d been talking to him and Billy (was it Billy? He wasn’t sure, now), and why they had still somehow understood that separating Antares from his tiny, barely working toy wand (one he’d filched from somewhere and had smuggled into school) was something that would hurt him.

Antares' magic had virtually exploded under the threat, and there had been no more Muggle primary school for him.

"Right, then! Books away, wands out – it's time to test our new theory..." Antares sighed, setting the last needed feather down in front of a cheerful-looking pair of girls whose names he kept forgetting, then setting down the box on Flitwick's desk as he continued to direct the class. "The incantation, as you all remember, is *Wingardium leviosa*. Now, on three, levitate your goose feathers. One – two – "

Cries of "*Wingardium leviosa!*" echoed around the classroom in various tones, accompanied by various wand movements, some mistaken and some not, and Antares was very busy for that short moment after the first spells had taken or backfired. He stopped Draco's feathers from shooting up the noses of Blaise and Finch-Fletchley near the back of the class, tried to point out to pompous little Ernie Macmillan that swishing like a windmill was probably why his eagle feather wasn't stirring, and generally hopped round the classroom helping Professor Flitwick restore order once again.

Well, until the next time Flitwick let everyone go at the spell again. Antares sighed, listened to the cries begin again, and headed quickly for the loudest source. It looked like it was going to be a long class.

By the time they'd left the Charms classroom, Daphne seemed to have calmed down a little (enough to actually nod at Antares when he carefully corrected her wand focus), but not much. Antares, feeling guiltier by the second, had kept stealing puzzled glances in her direction every so often, but had had no chance to sound out Blaise or even Tracey during the busy lesson. Something horrible had definitely happened to her, enough that she was a lot more silent and still than usual, and barely made any effort to Levitate anything at all.

"Blaise, any idea what's up with Daphne?" Blaise slowed automatically, giving him the usual sideways curious look. "I just gave her condolences from Pucey and Warrington, and she just went all weepy, so I was wondering..."

"Condolences for her? Why?"

“Wouldn’t be asking you if I knew why, you idiot. Adrian and Charles didn’t tell me anything, except if you count Adrian saying I was a ninny for asking,” was Antares’ short reply. Blaise shrugged, looking a little disgruntled as he did so.

“I heard something, but I’m not really sure – doesn’t even bear repeating, it’s that far-fetched. And anyway Daphne’s so touchy sometimes, you never know – it could just be that her mum’s old kneazle died, or something – ” Blaise’s wry, bored comment was suddenly cut off by a low sob from ahead of them, and Antares looked up just in time to see Daphne tear herself away from Pansy’s worried side.

“Oh, that was really nice of you, saying that so loudly,” Antares muttered as a guilty look crossed Blaise’s face. “Really smooth, Blaise.”

“Fuck off,” Blaise said half-heartedly, as Daphne abruptly turned the corner far ahead of them, pushing rudely past a gossiping group of older Gryffindor girls as she hared off to goodness knew where.

“Mind your language,” Antares said automatically. Blaise’s mouth had been getting fouler and fouler ever since the day they’d become friends, and exactly why, Antares didn’t know. It wasn’t like his habit was tasteful or anything, or earned him more than several odd or disapproving looks from the teachers or even from older Slytherin students, so it probably wasn’t the smartest move for Blaise to make. “Oh, hi, Tracey – what was up with that last Levitating Charm you did, anyway? I could feel it practically tugging at my robes and everything, you know.”

“You can feel it?” Tracey said, falling properly into step with Antares and Blaise, having just detached herself from Flitwick’s laughably stern little talk back in the classroom. She’d set her eagle feather on fire every time, and had been so obviously getting bored of trying and trying in tandem with that meek little Abbot (who Antares sometimes suspected was really quite afraid of Tracey), and by the end of the class, she’d taken to trying to levitate up the robes of everyone around her. Luckily, Antares had been passing by, and had confusedly sensed what she might be trying to do and put a stop to it

before she set someone's robes on fire. "I was being really sneaky, though – "

"It doesn't seem to matter with me," Antares admitted, feeling somewhat self-conscious as Blaise began to give him that speculative look again. "I don't know why, I could just sort of feel it, like you were actually physically pulling at my robes."

"So you're saying that you're basically a magical sensor or something?" Blaise said sceptically. "Oh please, there's got to be more to it than that – "

"I tried telling Flitwick about it the other day, when we were going over the demonstration for this class," Antares said lowly, not quite knowing why he was telling the both of them these things, things he'd never thought to tell anyone but Bella, who he knew wouldn't overthink it, or – "He just went on and on about intent, and how it's me being able to sense intent, and I just thought that was stupid, because I saw Tracey flicking her wand at me out of the corner of my eye, so – "

"What, you saw me?" Tracey demanded. "How?"

"Part of me helping the professors is spotting things that they can't on their own, you idiot. And your wand motions were the bloody length of your desk, if course I saw you."

"Still doesn't answer the question of why you can sense intent," Blaise muttered, rolling his eyes. "Honestly, the way you fiddle with the conversation sometimes, Antares, I might think you were trying to avoid the subject – "

Antares tried not to blush or scowl, and failed. Bella had always told him how tactless he was about conversation switches, and – "So what? Take a hint, Blaise," Tracey said absently, not seeming to see Blaise's sharp look in Antares' uncomfortable direction as they trooped into the Great Hall. Antares felt quite thankful to have Blaise give Tracey a hard look right then, because of her slightly tactless comment.

“Like you took a hint when Flitwick told you it was swish and flick, not swing and flick?” Blaise asked, his voice just this side of snide. He waved to Terry Boot as they all struggled down between the Slytherin and Ravenclaw tables, the space between them partially filled with seventh years arguing good-naturedly over some strange Arithmancy function.

“You’re just annoyed ‘cause I was having fun,” Tracey said defensively, blushing. Blaise rolled his eyes.

“So torturing that poor Abbot girl counts as having fun to you?” Antares stifled a grin. Sometimes it was funny the way Tracey didn’t quite see the effect she could have on timid people – he didn’t know now why he’d thought her shy at all, with her edgy gestures and constant, simmering energy. Maybe it was because he’d never really paid attention, or something. Tracey sniffed disdainfully as they continued to weave their way through to their end of the Slytherin table.

“I wasn’t torturing her, Blaise. Just because I set fire to one or two – ”

Blaise snorted. “ – to every one of your eagle feathers – ”

“Oh, piss off, it’s not like *you* can get everything right the first time, smarty-pants,” Tracey said dismissively, and that was suddenly it. One minute, Antares had been listening to the mostly good-natured bickering of his friends. The next –

“You think you’re so *smart!*” Tracey was whispering violently, thumping her bag heavily on the floor. “Like you’re the only one that ever sees anything – ”

“And you think you always know what everyone’s about, don’t you?” Blaise retorted in a frantic whisper, hardly seeming to notice as his own bag slid to the floor. “You’re such a bloody prig, Tracey – ”

“Don’t you *dare*, Blaise Zabini!” Tracey continued furiously, poking Blaise hard in his side with her wand, forcing him to turn round to face her with a face like thunder. “You’re the priggist prig I’ve ever known! You go on and on about how everything’s *not right* and *not fair* – ”



“Of course I bloody do! How can’t I? You, you’re always picking on people, wasting all our time with jabbering on about how much of an idiot Zachariah Smith is, and how you want to hex him good even though he’s in second year – well, Tracey, here’s news for you: you’re a disgusting, mean person too! I can ask questions and find out stuff if I want to, and it’s none of your fucking *business!*”

Blaise seized his bag and stalked off, obviously furious, leaving behind him a deafening, uncomfortable silence – at least at their end of the table. Pansy was still looking from Tracey to Antares in obvious anticipation, Draco was sniggering behind his hand, and Ted was looking thoughtfully at an obviously upset Tracey. Millicent, Greg and Vince were pretending to have some conversation, and Daphne – Daphne still looked miserable, poking wearily at the food on her plate.

Antares sighed, feeling irritated. What was *up* with everyone today, anyway? When Tracey made a jerky move to pick up her bag and go the same way as Blaise, Antares practically dragged her back into her seat and sat watch over her, making her fill her plate and eat despite her sour expression and stiff shoulders. Conversation gradually began to wash among all of them again, but Antares wasn’t quite listening. With Daphne now sitting opposite him (Blaise had originally had the dubious honour of that position), he could hardly focus on Greg flapping his mouth enthusiastically about the latest postponement of the start of the World Quidditch season. Finally, he decided that a careful question wouldn’t hurt.

“Daphne?” she started slightly, jabbing her fork into the pathetic ribbons remaining of a sausage she’d been cutting up ever since the meal started. “Is everything – are you okay?” Daphne swallowed and nodded, chin lifting oddly, almost in defiance. “What – ” Tracey pinched him, making him scowl at her and try to regain the thread of his question, but not before Pansy could start a loud conversation on some new kind of hair gel or other, effectively distracting Daphne. “What is your bleeding problem, Tracey?”

“More like what’s Daphne’s,” she muttered, voice turning fierce and lowering to a whisper as she went on. “Don’t ask now, please – I’ll tell you when we get away, I promise.”

“And if I do?” Antares said, rolling his eyes. Everyone was making such a –

“Then you’ll know the reason why, you idiot,” Tracey snapped. “There, I’ve warned you. Now let me finish my pathetic little meal, all right?” There was no more conversation on the topic after that, as Antares had heard the clear vein of warning running through Tracey’s clipped words. Whatever had happened to Daphne, she definitely didn’t want to talk about it, and though she was no great friend of his or whatever, he’d rather not earn her enmity (and probably Pansy’s, and Tracey’s, to a degree) by pushing for facts he’d probably get later on.

And get he did. Not ten minutes out of the Hall after a somewhat hasty, uncomfortable meal, Tracey had dragged him into the broom closet beside the double doors of the Entrance Hall, her mouth opening almost as soon as she’d slammed the door behind them.

“Daphne’s sister eloped a week ago, all right? To some poor little Muggleborn clerk working at some stupid new broom company too....” Antares’ eyes widened. A *Greengrass* and a muggleborn wizard? For a long moment, Antares wondered if his mum had heard – it would probably be all over Diagon Alley, the Greengrasses being just influential enough that everyone with a sufficiently well-to-do shop would be connected to them. And anyway, it was probably a bit like what her own sister did, ages and ages ago, only perhaps a little better. His mini-reverie was broken as Tracey sighed tiredly and went on. “Well obviously their Council came down hard on her. Wouldn’t want anyone else thinking that their sons and daughters have no proper wizarding pride or whatnot.”

“What did they do to her?” Antares asked, already anticipating the answer. Excommunication from the family was the option that the more stringent old families (like the Blacks) often took, but sometimes stripping the person temporarily of their magic was used instead. It all depended on who was on the family council and maybe how lowborn or poor the partner of the erring witch or wizard was.

“Stripped her of her magic for half a year, and made sure it would be gone on our holidays for the next five years,” Tracey whispered. Antares closed his eyes, trying hard not to think of how not being able

to *Accio* things would be like. How not being able to see even *Hogwarts* would be like, for any length of time...It was just horrible even thinking about it, even if he knew quite well that Bella would never do something like that to him – “It’s horrible, isn’t it? And Daphne was really close to her and everything. She got the letter this morning, when all you lot weren’t down yet, so...” Tracey sighed again. “Everyone in Slytherin’s been talking about it, and it’s driving her mad – ”

“Oh god, I gave her condolences,” Antares whispered, suddenly remembering the awful expression on Daphne’s face when he’d offhandedly whispered them to her. It was tradition for pureblood families to give their sometimes spiteful, sometimes caring formal condolences to each other in times of such tragedy. In this case, receiving them from someone like him would be nothing short of a disgrace, especially since everyone thought he was a halfblood –

“Who told you to – ”

“Pucey,” Antares said, suddenly quite angry. “And – and *Warrington* – I thought they were my – well, not my friends, but at least – ”

“Well, they don’t know her well enough,” Tracey said, hastily. “Daphne used to visit with the Warringtons, I think, and a cousin of hers married your Warrington’s older brother, so maybe – ”

“They could have fucking told me,” Antares said fiercely, feeling queasy. They’d said it in such an offhand manner –

“They’re third years, Antares,” Tracey said sharply. “Come on, you’ve got to have realised that they’d thought you’d know already. It’s tradition not to deliver them directly, don’t you know? They could’ve picked Blaise to do it, you know, not you – I think it’s more of an honour, myself.”

“You would,” Antares said viciously, tensing as he processed what she’d just said. Tracey just gave him a hard look and sighed, turning away. Antares scowled at the mops and buckets in the smelly closet, trying to find some reason to be upset about it all. He *hated* being used like this, like some stupid conduit or something. Whether Adrian

or Charles thought it was an honour or whatever was beside the point  
—

“Oh stop sulking, will you? We’ve still got to get to Transfig on time, and I’m certainly not sitting by Blaise, or by myself,” Tracey said sharply, prodding him into picking up his bag. Antares did it as sullenly as possible, giving Tracey a nasty look as she shoved open the door.

“I don’t see why you’re so angry at him,” he muttered, following her out. “It’s hardly like he *used* you or anything.”

Tracey snorted. “Blaise is too smart for his own good, and he needs to learn that people don’t always like being cornered into answering to his stupid questions,” she said, giving Antares a pointed look. “Now there’s lots of things *I’m* dying to know about you, but I don’t go trying to make you tell them if you don’t want to yet, do I?” Antares glared at her, knowing it was weaker than usual. “Besides, you usually ‘fess up if you’re left to yourself.” He gave Tracey a hard look, but that didn’t stop her from giving him a half-smile and continuing. “I’m sure you’d have told us all about what Flitwick’s been teaching you if Blaise had kept his sorry mouth shut...”

Antares looked away in every direction possible at that, but found it was hard going keeping the smile off his face as Tracey bullied him along into Professor McGonagall’s classroom. As they burst in only about a minute late, Blaise gave him a wounded look that Antares tried to ignore as he dropped his bag next to Tracey and went warily up to apologise to McGonagall and ask if this was to be a demonstration class or not. It was not, and Antares settled into his seat beside a rather smug Tracey, feeling quite guilty as Blaise began to give him accusing looks.

The class didn’t go very well. Blaise kept making snide comments about Tracey just loud enough for everyone to hear but not loud enough for McGonagall to really do anything other than glare at them and try to lecture louder. Tracey made them right back, and soon the class had degenerated into furious whispered comments zinging back and forth around Antares. Tracey called Blaise every version of the word ‘snob’, and Blaise hissed back horrible things about her family

and just how they'd gotten all their money. Draco giggled somewhere behind, heartily enjoying the whole debacle with every inch of his stupid little arse, and Antares sighed and answered McGonagall's questions as loudly as he could, and tried hard to keep up with the discussion on Transfiguration Theory with McGonagall and a surprisingly attentive Ted.

Soon enough, Blaise made a comment about how all Davis women were either stupid or loose that made Tracey gasp and splutter and set Pansy and Millicent into the same state of stupefied horror. Daphne, who had been sitting right in front of Blaise and doodling listlessly on her parchment notes, turned round and gave him a *look*. "Would you mind leaving off talking about 'stupid women' in general, just now?" she said coldly, emphasising 'stupid women' with something just short of a sneer. Blaise sneered back, looking uncharacteristically angry, and as he opened his mouth, Antares sighed to himself.

Knowing Blaise's constant irritation at being interrupted or told off for saying something he thought important, this definitely wouldn't be good –

"You're one to talk," he said quietly, eyes horribly cold, "considering what all the ladies in *your* family get up to – "

Everyone gasped. McGonagall was there in minutes, towering over Blaise, but not quite in time to stop Daphne's undignified, desperate scramble out of her chair, towards a slightly chagrined Blaise, and –

*Crack!* Antares was half on his feet in surprise from just how *hard* that slap had sounded, and was, despite his misgivings, right there beside Pansy trying to hold on to a now sobbing Daphne and stop her from fleeing the classroom.

"Let go of Miss Greengrass this *instant!*" McGonagall barked, over the angry shouts of Tracey and the defensive replies of Blaise. Antares did, more out of concern for his weeping classmate than anything else. Pansy held on a minute longer, but only to her detriment – Daphne wrenched free of her with a particularly loud sob and was running out of the classroom, her face twisted in misery and embarrassment as the door slammed behind her. "Back to your seats,

everyone! Yes, that includes you, Davis. Sit down, now.” McGonagall’s steely stare had everyone standing scurrying back to their seats in moments, and soon enough the once-noisy classroom was as quiet as a tomb. McGonagall nodded slightly, returning to her place just in front of her large desk. “Zabini, you will see me in my office after this class, is that clear?” Blaise nodded, his face blank, and suddenly McGonagall was replying to Ted’s last tentative question on the true essence of all things.

“Now, Mr. Nott, I believe you wished to know if objects retain their true essence when they are transfigured...”

When the awful Transfigurations class was finally over, Antares couldn’t leave fast enough. Tracey stuck by him the whole way down to the Slytherin dorms, glaring at Blaise as they went. When Daphne was nowhere to be seen in the common room, Tracey practically snarled in Blaise’s direction before flouncing off to the girls’ dormitory, and it was all Antares could do not to sigh. Seeing Draco’s wide smile as he headed past Antares for the dormitory with Greg and Vince in tow, Antares scowled, restraining the impulse to filch something important from him as he went past, because Blaise was still watching.

Staring, in fact. Enough that Antares rolled his eyes and broke the silence of his own volition, just as Ted flitted by them, still looking thoughtful.

“Are you going to just stand there and stare all day, Blaise?” Blaise started, looking oddly guilty, and sighed. “Just apologise or talk and be done with it, all right? I don’t want to miss the Feast, and I’m not going to let you chicken out of it just because Daphne might be there, either.”

“I’m not chicken,” Blaise protested weakly, fidgeting with the strap of his bag. “I’m just – ”

“Stupid? Absolutely and completely without working brains for the day?” Antares said sarcastically, smiling a little to take the sting out of his words. He just didn’t feel like arguing with anyone right now. And, despite the fact that Blaise did irritate him, and had said absolutely horrible things to both Tracey and Daphne, Antares was still his friend.

Sort of. "I told you you shouldn't have started swearing like me – it's obviously gotten to you in some deeply frightening sort of way – "

"I just – I didn't think what I heard about Daphne's family was serious – "

"Well, it was," Antares said, bluntly. Blaise looked down, looking even more unhappy. Just as Antares began to think of continuing on to the dorm, Blaise began to speak again, in a very small voice.

"I don't know – I'm not sure what to do, now."

"Just fix it, Blaise," Antares said, cutting him off as he swung determinedly for their dormitory, now not quite caring what Draco might say to him as he entered. "Just fix it, and fix it fast, all right? I'm not friends with complete wankers, I'll have you know." Blaise let himself be left behind, still looking uncomfortably guilty, but Antares shook off the sort of angry pity seeping into him on his behalf, firmly putting away the fear that Blaise would just turn his nose up at him for the lecture as well. Unless Blaise was ready to take the consequences for his useless behaviour, Antares would be far better off just being friends with Tracey, and no one else.

Fifteen minutes later, Antares sat down at his table in the quite interestingly decorated Great Hall with a (hopefully concealed) grimace, trying to ignore the way Blaise and Tracey were still glaring at each other. Daphne, unsurprisingly, was nowhere to be seen, and Pansy looked a little miserable, and kept shooting Blaise furious looks. She'd disappeared just after Transfiguration, and had come back Daphne-less, so – yeah. Draco, still very pleased at all the tension despite its rather awful cause, just went on bragging and shooting off at the mouth without a care for the stilted silence that seemed to have their end of the table in a chokehold.

"Welcome!" Dumbledore's voice cut into Antares' worried thoughts like a cold spear. "As all of you know..." Antares picked at the gold cutlery before him, toying with one of his knives as Dumbledore drivelled on about the historical significance of Halloween. Hopefully, the whole stalemate wouldn't last for long.

Indeed, when the meal finally appeared on their table in its usual sudden manner, all of the first years seemed to relax a little. Antares soon found himself carrying on a somewhat stilted conversation about broom modification with Ted Nott. Blaise and Tracey seemed to be listening but ostensibly not taking part, and Draco, Vince, Greg and Pansy were all engaged in dissecting the eating habits of various people on their table and on the others. It made for strange conversation, but at least there *was* conversation. Silence would have been much more uncomfortable.

“Quality Quidditch doesn’t carry tools. I’ve snuck in often enough to check,” Antares was saying in response to a question from Ted, when Millie, who had been sort of listening in for a short while now, butted in.

“Why were you sneaking in?”

“If I know anything about Black here, it’s because they can’t stand him,” Pansy said, briefly abandoning her critique of Hannah Abbott’s fumbling. Antares felt like rolling his eyes and sending a snide comment her way (goodness knew how many shops on Diagon refused entry or service to *her* uncle – the man was said to be horribly forgetful, and one for getting out of paying his debts in the most astonishingly legal manner), and, after a second, chose to just go with the flow. It was the truth, anyway.

“Exactly.” When Millie’s eyes brightened and Pansy leaned nearer, obviously angling to hear some gossip about him, Antares added something. “Why’s not the point,” he said firmly. Then he noticed the look of slightly guilty curiosity on Blaise’s face and cursed himself for not recognising the in he could have left for his friend, but continued anyway. “But still, no. I think I asked someone where they might carry broom-mod stuff, and they went raving about somewhere in Hogsmeade – ”

“Raven Rivenwood’s Emporium, right?” Ted said, interrupting in that sort of offhand, slightly rude manner that sometimes irritated Antares. Antares nodded, and Ted echoed it. “Yeah, that’s where my cousin goes. He’s absolutely mad for brooms – started work at Nimbus two years ago, in fact.”



Antares blinked. “*Nimbus* Nimbus? Sounds really cool – ”

“Don’t be fooled, it’s deadly dull,” Ted said, greedily buttering another roll. “Well, not for him – my aunt told my dad that he comes home muttering and stinking of broom polish, and that his room is covered in splinters half the time,” Ted went on, his tone disparaging. “Don’t see the appeal of mucking around with brooms *that* much, myself. Now, I won’t deny that Fred can cast a mean speed enhancing charm, but really – ”

“You haven’t seen anything seriously modded in action, then,” Blaise interjected impatiently. “My stepdad’s excellent at it, and it bloody well shows – he’s got a Comet Two-Sixty that flies like a Nimbus 2000, I swear – ”

“That is such a load of bull, Blaise,” Antares said helpfully, trying not to flash Blaise an encouraging grin. He’d been glad this conversation had come up – Blaise had somehow inherited a healthy obsession with modifying magical objects of all kinds, and modding brooms was just one of the things he was interested in tinkering with. It didn’t quite seem to matter, just now, that Blaise had said such stupid things – Antares rather wanted everything to be okay just for these few minutes of the feast, which they were all supposed to enjoy. He (or Tracey, more likely) could properly give Blaise his very much deserved talking-to later, anyway...

“No, no – get this, my cousins had a race – ”

“A race to mutual stupidity, I suppose,” Tracey muttered under her breath, but everyone ignored her. When Blaise really got going with a story, it was hard not to get absorbed. Antares felt slightly guilty about it this time, but thinking of how Tracey was practically guaranteed to be the one sounding Blaise out after the feast (she’d do it even if he had to lock them into an empty classroom to make them get on) allowed Antares to look much less guilty than he felt.

“One on a Nimbus 2000, fairly new, no problems, and the other on my stepdad’s battered Two-Sixty. They were neck and neck all the way across the Quidditch pitch, I swear – ”

“So who won?” Pansy asked curiously, obviously having forgotten that she’d been talking to Draco (who, scowling, was trying to pretend he wasn’t listening, and failing at it) earlier, as well as the fact that it had been Blaise’s big mouth that had ruined the last class for everyone, especially Daphne.

Blaise narrowed his eyes in that odd, sly way that always seemed to fall short of suspicious. “The younger cousin. But only because he’s mad on a broom, like Antares.”

“Ah,” Ted said, nodding, and it was obviously more than Draco could stand.

“Antares isn’t that good – he was just fast because his fat head was dragging him down,” Draco said nastily. “Gravity, not skill – ”

“Race me, then?” Antares threw out, his grin smug. “Flint’s not particular about who comes at the *end* of practice – maybe he’ll even let you touch his Nimbus.”

“Now *that* race, I’d watch,” Tracey interjected, giving Blaise a superior look. Antares sighed as Blaise returned her look with a sneer – he would be really, really relieved when this stupid thing between them was all over.

He was just starting to plan on exactly how to get them both into that locked classroom sometime tomorrow afternoon when the doors shivered, then opened with a bang. His eyes snapped to the doors as they were slammed open, widening when Quirrel limped and stumbled in. All of a sudden, he felt really sorry for the man – he could probably be a good teacher if he had a bit more courage, and by the smug look on Snape’s face, whatever he’d encountered before coming into the Hall hadn’t been an accident at all –

“Troll, in the dungeons!” Quirrel’s gasp stilled the chatter and squeaking in the Hall like next to nothing could as the man swayed on his feet, looking paler and paler by the minute. “Thought you ought to know...” He fainted, and Antares, full of horror, was suddenly on his feet and looking, horrified, into Blaise’s eyes, because *Daphne* could be down there.

Alone. With a *Troll*.

"I will have *silence!*" Dumbledore was thundering, "Prefects, lead your houses..." But all Antares could think about was the panicked shreds of conversation floating among his panicked year mates. Tracey looked frozen with horror, and even Draco looked surprised and quite frightened.

"Oh, god, Daphne," Pansy was muttering to herself, over and over again, as their prefects tried to whip them into shape and out of their seats. "I shouldn't have left her, god – "

"Where?" Tracey suddenly demanded, her paralysis broken, seizing hold of Pansy before she could run off to tell the prefects, tell someone, anyone.

Pansy looked back, eyes wide. "Toilets, on the third floor – "

Antares clamped down on Blaise's wrist as soon as he could get hold of it in the panic and confusion. "Let's go," he whispered, fiercely, because he'd already seen the look on Tracey's face, the hard, direct one that practically screamed, "I'll cover for you!". The look on Blaise's face showed that he'd seen it too, and soon, as they were being herded out of the Great Hall and up the stairs, they were edging carefully out of the prefects' sight. "On three, the classroom on the right," Antares whispered again. Blaise nodded, and then they were inside the cold room, shivering as the noise passed them by, the noise of panicky feet trampling on the way to wherever the prefects and teachers were diverting Hufflepuff and Slytherin to. Silence gradually descended, and Antares steeled himself to mutely poke his head out of the classroom.

The way was clear. Antares' decision now was not. Surely Daphne wasn't on her way downstairs? Pansy had said third floor, those abandoned girls' toilets, and he knew the way. But – no. They needed to warn her, she wouldn't know. Probably wouldn't even notice, in her grief –

"Come on." Antares nearly didn't recognise his voice; it was that low, that fierce. That fearless. He held back a shaky laugh as he and Blaise began to rush up stairs and dart down corridors, hoping

Daphne was okay. He was far from fearless, oh, he knew that. His shoulder was itching strangely, and his legs were shaky despite the fact that he was in the lead and probably managing the walk with no problem at all, and his heart was thudding as they turned the corner, and saw – “What the – what’s he doing?”

“I don’t know,” Blaise whispered, keeping back and keeping still as they watched Professor Snape enter the stairwell to the left of them. “Maybe we should tell him – ”

“And get herded off to wherever? He wouldn’t go after Daphne *now*, I know he wouldn’t – ”

“But – ”

“We can get to the girls’ bathroom if we take that right,” Antares said, cutting him off. “We’ll be there in minutes, I promise, and we’ll just sit tight with her until the whole thing’s over...”

They moved as quietly as possible, freezing at perfectly innocent noises and trying not to bump into each other as they went round corners. And then suddenly Antares wasn’t quite sure which corner to take, and after that they both realised they hadn’t seen this part of the castle properly before, but were sure it was on the third floor, and hoped it was close to the toilets Pansy had mentioned, and then –

And then.

That foul stench, that shuffling – they both froze. Morgana of the rock, the troll was – was up *here*. Antares couldn’t understand it, but –

The huge, hulking troll appeared even huger in the dim lighting of the corridor, but Antares wasn’t even thinking about the bloody corridor or even Daphne any longer. All he could see or think was that the troll hadn’t seen them, it *hadn’t*, and it wouldn’t if they kept still, and – oh, thank Merlin, thank the fucking *stars* it was looking into an open doorway nearby, and Antares couldn’t breathe for gratitude as it snuffled and shuffled its way into it after hesitating for a moment that felt like years.

“Oh, fuck,” Blaise whispered. Antares resisted saying the same thing, closing his eyes in relief. “We have to get – ”

“Wait – see, the key’s in the lock, right there...” Antares trailed off, as Blaise was staring at him as if he was mad. “What? We can tiptoe up and lock it in, and get a teacher or something – ”

“Or we can *go!*” Blaise spat at him, his whisper shaky with fear. “The teachers can find it on their own, you know that – ”

“I’ll do it, then,” Antares snapped. He couldn’t understand why Blaise was being so stupid about this – if they locked the troll up and got a teacher, the whole problem would be over in minutes, and they could find Daphne with no trouble, and the feast could maybe go on. Instead, Blaise was repetitively muttering “Bloody stupid hero idiot,” in his direction as he crept up to the door. Heart thudding in his ears, he reached for the door, and, minutes later, it was slammed and locked, and he was practically beating Blaise to the nearby stairwell. “See? I fucking told you – ”

A high, terrified scream erupted from behind the door, and both of them stopped, horror seeping into them. Oh, god, god, *god*, there was someone *inside* –

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck *fuck...*” Blaise was babbling. Useless. Antares whipped out his wand, the beating of his heart coalescing with the screaming into a horrible sound. The sound, the screams – murder. The troll would kill – they were excitable – “Antares, *no!*” But he was already wrenching open the door and breathing hard at the still person huddled up in the corner by a sink – a girl – girls’ toilets – it could be *Daphne* –

“Get in here and her out!” Antares bellowed backwards, eyes on the troll as it slowly turned, its club in one hand and one of the sinks that had been at a gushing hole in the wall that the girl who could be Daphne was huddling against. The air stank of broken pipes and water and foul troll, and as the troll began to shuffle closer, it got worse. “Do it, Blaise!”

“No,” Blaise was saying, terrified, but coming closer, and as the troll growled at him eyes turning on Blaise as it dropped the sink, Antares knew he had to do something more to distract it.

*Spell, think of a spell –*

“*Mordeo!*” he yelled, needing this, praying the Stinging Hex would work as a beam of light shot out and hit the Troll in the head. It bellowed, raising its club, now only focused on Antares, so – “Blaise, get a fucking *move* on! *Mordeo!*” The light his wand emitted was brighter now, but it didn’t stop the troll from stamping forward, polluting the air with its stench as it roared and roared – “*Impedimenta!*” But that hardly did anything to slow it, and Antares found himself backing for the door, breath coming short with fear as Blaise darted round the back of the troll jerkily and began to tug on the shivering form of the girl over in the corner. “*Mordeo!*” The troll bellowed again, then suddenly, faster than anything Antares had seen, its arm was swinging the club straight for him.

It was all he could do to jump aside, and even then, the shock of the club hitting the wall to his right sent him tumbling to his feet. Antares could dimly see Blaise tugging blindly at the girl in the corner, and he knew now that he’d have to draw the troll out somehow, unless there’d be no getting away from it. A bellow and another swing and he was away, darting through the door as quickly as he could, hoping the troll would follow him. It did, but quicker still was the club swinging and swinging as the troll bellowed and Antares began to sob with fear and shortness of breath from the dodging he was trying to do. And then he was back against the wall, and Blaise was yelling something from the door of the toilets instead of *getting away*, and the troll had turned away again, brandishing its club, and he shouted the first spell that came to his mind – “*Expelliarmus!*”

The club slipped out of the troll’s hands like butter, flying towards the wall horribly near Blaise’s head, and the troll’s attention was back where it belonged, too late. “*Mordeo!*” Antares screamed, aiming his wand into its eyes, willing the pain to force it to close them so he could dart round and *run* with Blaise and Daphne, and its scream as it reached up and batted at its eyes was like nothing he’d ever heard, but he wasn’t sticking around to listen, and –

Beams of red light began to slam into the troll, one after another, all coming from the direction of the stairs in which Antares was hoping to head. Professor Snape's black form appeared first, followed by that of McGonagall and Quirrel, the former looking frighteningly angry and the latter looking as pale as he'd been in the Great Hall. The troll tottered to the ground with a crash, thankfully not in Blaise's direction, and Antares could hardly breathe for the rush of relief that was flowing through him now.

The look on Snape's face was unreadable as he stepped forward, wand out, to bend over the troll. Quirrel's eyes were wide with fright, flicking from Antares to the troll, and McGonagall – Antares gulped. McGonagall's lips were thin and white with anger, and the sight of it was rapidly bleeding his relief away.

"What on earth were you thinking?" she snapped, voice cold with fury. "You better explain why you and Mr. Zabini are not with your house *immediately* – "

Antares immediately spoke up, anxious to set things right. "Professor, we were looking for – "

"You could have been killed," McGonagall said, voice rising. "Are you *completely* stupid, young man?"

"Let him speak, Minerva," Snape suddenly said, looming next to him. His face was even paler than hers, and his lips just as thin with anger. "Do tell us why you thought it fit to disobey the command of the headmaster and battle a *troll*, Mr. Black."

"They saved me," said a small, un-Daphne like voice from behind them. Antares twisted round in surprise, face paling as he saw that the girl that Blaise had had to prise off the wall in the toilets was none other than – than *Granger*. "I was in the toilets – it came in, and they saved me," she repeated, her chin trembling, her eyes red with tears.

"We were looking for Daphne Greengrass, sir," Blaise interjected quickly, his own voice just as shaky. "We didn't know Granger was here, we just thought – "

"You were looking for Miss Greengrass, you say?" Snape said sharply. "Was she not at the feast?"

"No, sir," Antares said, trying to keep the palpable relief out of his voice. Snape narrowed his eyes at him, but he held his gaze, trying hard to appear honest, hoping that McGonagall wouldn't –

"It seems to me," Snape said, breaking eye contact, "that they were, in fact, looking for their absent housemate. The Greengrass girl, Minerva – you remember her situation...?"

"Oh, I do," McGonagall replied frostily, now staring daggers at Blaise in particular. "But should they not have informed a teacher?"

"We thought she was on the second floor in the girls' toilets, Professor," Blaise said, voice steadying somewhat. "Professor Quirrel said the troll was in the dungeons, so we thought it would be fine to –"

" – risk your lives by setting off on a fool's journey. I assume you will not be making such a poor decision again?" Snape said menacingly, the last sentence clearly an order.

"No sir," Antares chorused with Blaise. Granger's face wobbled as Snape's sharp eyes turned to her, but before he could say anything, McGonagall had cut him off.

"I assume you are not hurt, Miss Granger?" she said briskly, giving Snape a hard look. When Granger nodded, McGonagall sighed. "Return to your dormitory immediately, girl. Off you go." Granger, already edging away, stopped right in front of Antares, and –

"What the...?" Granger's hair was practically in his mouth, and her arms felt very soft and skinny around his neck. Antares blushed hard, wishing that no one (Professor McGonagall. Professor Quirrel. *Professor Snape*) was here to see this – display. In a moment, Granger's arms had slipped away, and she was now attacking a wide-eyed Blaise with the same fervour. "Erm –"

"Thank you," she said, a little tearfully, and then she'd run off, obviously unwilling to face the looks of surprise from the teachers.



Antares looked up at Snape, then, wishing he hadn't, looked down at his feet. He felt much like running off instead of facing *that* wry mask of contempt –

“And as for you,” McGonagall said, her stern tone faltering somewhat, as if she still didn't quite believe what they'd all just seen Granger do, “Five points each from Slytherin, for not reporting your concern to a Prefect or professor, as is expected of you.” Antares couldn't stop his mouth from opening to protest such harsh punishment for *saving someone's life*, but he promptly shut it at the expression on McGonagall's face. “Anything to add, Mr. Black?”

“Actually, Black, I have some questions for you,” Snape cut in suddenly, looming a lot closer than Antares had thought he'd been. “What did you do to deter the troll, boy?” Antares reddened, not quite knowing what ‘deter’ meant, and so –

“Disarming Charm, sir, at the last,” Blaise said quickly, a note of fierce pride colouring his tone. He turned slightly to Antares, giving him an encouraging look as he continued, “I didn't know the rest he used, but –”

“Stinging Hexes,” Antares interjected, catching on. “And an Impediment Jinx, but that didn't work, so. Stinging Hexes, Impediment Jinx, and one Disarming Charm.” Behind Snape's coolly interested face was Quirrel's own, and Antares tried to suppress yet another blush. Quirrel, though quite pale, was actually beaming –

“Three defensive hexes, hmm?” Snape mused. “Thirty points to Slytherin, then, for a discerning use of magic in time of need.” McGonagall's face went red, her lips thinning out even more. Antares and Blaise kept their faces as blank as was possible, knowing not to show any signs of pleasure, and soon enough – “You may return to your dormitories, boys, as the threat is passed.”

Exchanging a look of positive relief – for a moment there it had seemed like they were about to get detention from McGonagall, of all things – Blaise and Antares didn't need to be told twice to go back to Slytherin. They fairly ran, giddy with the thought of Snape standing up to McGonagall on their behalf, enough to give them, and Slytherin,

*twenty points*. Blaise, wheezing slightly, waved away at Antares, who whispered the password ("*Toujours droite*") with new pleasure.

Tracey was the first one to reach them. "Where have you *been!*" She practically dragged them over towards the other first years, looking them up and down as they went. Antares, looking down at himself as they crossed the mostly staring common room, realised his robes were torn all across one arm and some of one shoulder, and filthy besides. Blaise wasn't much better off, his expensive robes speckled with filth and damp from dragging Granger through and around the rubble in the toilet. "And what were you doing? Daphne's fine, she's down here, but we didn't know – "

"We met the troll," Blaise said, suddenly finding his voice. Everyone stared at him, including Tracey, and Antares couldn't help smiling as everyone began speaking at once, all clamouring for details and telling them they *had* to be fibbing. After Antares quietly seconded Blaise's almost too exciting statement, everyone began to listen in earnest, Antares included. He lolled happily in an armchair beside him, proudly taking in how rapt the silence that surrounded the first years was. If anyone could tell this story, it was Blaise. Really, he thought even the second years were listening. And, of course –

"I'm sorry you had to come after me," Daphne muttered, after a hard prod from a wide-eyed Pansy, who was sitting beside her.

Blaise snorted. "Are you kidding? Antares gets off on rescuing, for crying out loud – you should've seen him, '*Get in here, Blaise*', like there wasn't a frigging *troll* inside there with him and Granger." He kicked Antares' foot with his messy shoes, a slightly thoughtful look on his face. "*We are even, aren't we? I think fighting a troll with you –*"

" – doesn't quite cover it," Antares said coldly, struggling not to laugh as everyone stared at him. "One every morning should be fine, if we can find them – "

The first years dissolved into laughter, Antares among them, and Blaise's was the loudest of them all. Antares grinned, leaning back. He could get used to this absence of tension, of rivalry. He really could.

*A/N: I'm back in the game, folks! I've been wanting to establish a regular pattern of updates for AST for so effing long...anyways.*

*FYI, this is not a shipping chapter of any kind. May I remind you that Antares will not begin any sort of romantic escapades until maybe third year? I'm going for realism, as I've been saying all along, and shipping is part of that. Or not part of it, as it goes. Oh, and forgive me if my reference to Heroditus is wrong as it probably is – just wanted a Roman name, his was the first to pop to mind. This make-believe architect has nothing whatsoever to do with the real Heroditus, I'm sure.*

*FYI (because I want to show off my mad Latin skillz), "Mordeo" means "to bite, sting", at least from the perspective of my ever-helpful Latin program. "Toujours droite" means "always right" in French. Oh, and the next chapter's Christmas, and from Bella's POV, and tentatively called "A New Kind of Holiday". You'll love it, hopefully.*

*FYI (last one, I promise!) there's a spoiler competition on my LJ for those who are interested. Remember? "e-m-pink . livejournal . com", with the spaces removed. If you win, you get 350 words from my raw outline for AST from the year of Antares' school life of your choice, so go ahead and try it.*

## **Chapter 15: A New Kind of Holiday**

Bella was humming.

She grinned, and continued to do so. It was an irritating habit her mother and countless aunts, relatives and frowning society women had never quite been able to curse out of her, and she knew it. She liked discordant melodies the most, and had a stubborn knack for remembering the ones she loved best. She'd been scraping by in a dim, cold Muggle theatre about four or five years ago on one of her somewhat futile, yet irresistible journeys back to Margaret Crenshaw's wizened side (Maggie lived in an equally wizened, tiny spot of a house that Bella somehow found comforting to visit, even after all these years), and had had the fortune (or misfortune) to hear several concerts and plays through and around the stiff doors that separated the paying from the paid.

Bella smiled, fondly, her wand twisting slightly in her hand as she continued to go through the now-familiar motions of housekeeping spells, brightening a spot there and straightening a cushion there, and finally getting that irritating film of dust off the bookshelves in the living room. In that time, she'd heard music to make even her hard heart sigh, music to make her blood boil just as well as a round of particularly nasty Dark Curses aimed at someone who deserved it, music to make her skin thrum with memories of odd parts of her life that she'd scarcely recalled by then. People she'd manipulated. Men she'd lusted after – paths she'd taken, forks in the road of her strange existence.

Bella couldn't help grinning again, it was so absurd. All of that feeling, that odd revolving in time behind her absurd little absurdity of a ticket window, all of it reduced into a steadily whistled tune that broke in places she couldn't quite recall. Perhaps there was some credence to the rumour that madness ran in her family, indeed.

The wards strained, heavily, then suddenly gushed, allowing the appearance of Severus and Antares all at once, laden with small bits of baggage and a small ingredient case she knew must be empty. Severus never Apparated with his ingredients – went against some

stupid code of potions master honour, for all she knew. And it affected some plants and things if your concentration was off –

“*Mum!*” Antares’ half-shout, half-squeal was like discordant music to Bella’s ears as he dropped his load here and there on the floor and ran, *ran*, like he used to, into her arms. “Did you get my last letter? My writing’s so good now, isn’t it? It was almost *snowing* at Hogwarts, Mum – the train back was excellent, is there supper, I’m sort of friends with a Warrington–”

“Ssh,” she whispered into his neck, breathing deep, stooping as much as was allowable, not wanting to let this moment go. Not really wanting him to ‘ssh’ anyway. “I’ve missed you, Antares.”

“Good,” was his breathless answer as his small arms squeezed around her waist. “I did too. Miss you.” Bella smiled into Antares’ neck, raising eyes to see Severus already painstakingly levitating their scattered luggage through the door and towards the stairs, his dark eyes roving about the room. “And Professor Snape says I can be on the Quidditch team next year, and about half of the players already like me...”

“You’ll be wanting a broom, then,” Bella remarked, smiling as she let him go, refraining the itch to put his wild hair in order. “Don’t worry – Madame Malkin’s is paying enough. I’ll get you one, you’ll see...” her voice trailed off as she glanced in Severus’ direction. She looked down at her son quickly, stifling a sigh at the odd, rigid nature of his face. She wasn’t quite sure why that last statement had bothered him, but – “Antares, will you set the table? There’s roast lamb in the oven, if you’ll care to get it out and stop babbling.” Antares grinned and was off in a flash, leaving Bella free to pick a trifle nervously at her robes and go after Severus. It was always easier if she pried whatever was bothering him out into the open as soon as possible.

“You changed the pillowcases,” was the first thing Severus said to Bella as she nudged his door open, consciously restraining herself from eyeing him up and down and slinking into his room to do something decidedly – “And don’t think I haven’t been noticing those dusting spells you’ve been casting on my bookshelves, either.”

“And a Merry Christmas to you too, Severus,” she replied wryly, deciding she’d enter the room anyway. Antares wouldn’t think of it as anything wrong – she’d certainly done that enough times before he’d gone off to Hogwarts, and he really hadn’t even noticed it. “You know very well coercing you to talk about what’s eating at you with my son in the kitchen is rather impossible. Just sit down and tell me what it is, please.”

When he actually did, Bella couldn’t hold back a slight gasp of surprise. “You’re giving in? Are you well, Severus?”

“Simply tired,” he replied shortly, rubbing at his eyes, the movement oddly forlorn for someone so normally fierce. “And worried, of course.” Bella crossed to sink down by him on the bed, calculating that even if Antares saw, all he’d really see was her gossiping away to Severus. “The Headmaster is a *fool* – hiding something of such great importance–” Severus stopped abruptly, looking furious with himself. Bella leaned in, touching his arm. “Hogwarts isn’t nearly as safe as he thinks. I wish he would see that...”

Feeling guilty and yet compelled to do it, Bella kissed him, cutting off his maudlin tone. It lasted a fair bit longer than what she’d had in mind, mostly because Severus seemed to fall on her like a ravening wolf, his hands skittering rudely up to her breasts and then –

A break. She gasped, needing the air, needing some kind of shock to remind her that things weren’t perfectly safe with Antares in the house, that she couldn’t just shove a limber hand down the front of his robes and squeeze.

“Didn’t we say–” Severus began in that horribly good hoarse voice, from near enough that she shivered and kissed him again.

“Just a kiss,” Bella breathed into Severus’ ear, trying to keep some control back. “He won’t see, or know –

“*Mealtime!*” Antares practically roared up the stairs. Bella closed her eyes and stifled a chuckle as Severus groaned softly, rolling his eyes.

“Don’t sulk,” she whispered in his ear, watching as he practically tore off his robes, the expression on his face one of thunderous, shiver-

inducing lust. "Christmas night should be fine, he always sleeps deeply then." Bella blew Severus a kiss, unable to repress her grin. "I'll come to your room, Severus."

"Bella," Severus half-groaned, half-muttered, but she was whisking out of the room as quickly as possible, mindful of how easily Antares might saunter up the stairs and start searching for her just because she'd not answered immediately. And, true to form, there he was, scrambling up the stairs, his hair looking wilder than ever, then pausing and grinning as he saw her emerge at the top of them.

"*There* you are," he said, rolling his eyes in an all-too-familiar way that made her grin again, and rapidly decide he could do with a bit of chasing down the stairs, even if she couldn't catch him. "I've just set out the – what, Mum *no*, I'm too old for – *no!*"

Bella flipped her hair over her shoulder, unable to keep from laughing as Antares, wide-eyed, tore into the kitchen in a way that suggested he wasn't too old for the chase at all.

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That evening passed quicker than many others Bella had known. It all streamed by her in a blur of quiet laughter and the odd, tight feeling she had every time Antares bumped into her in the kitchen or elsewhere. Severus' eyes seemed to linger on her throughout the night, making her want to blush or, even more unwisely, walk over and, with a patented mix of seduction and judicious prying, see what precisely had worn him down enough to want her like this. The hours seemed impossibly full as she finally sat Antares down beside her in the living room and patiently heard out his excitement about Hogwarts while steadily going through every non-invasive diagnostic spell she could remember.

Bella sighed now, running tired fingers through her hair as she bullied a staunchly complaining Antares up the stairs. By the time she'd finally gotten him to even agree that his bedtime was drawing near, she'd been the proud possessor of the knowledge of everything he'd eaten for breakfast for the last week, as well as the startling amount of new spells he'd learnt. Bella had pointedly avoided all talk of the disturbing encounter with the troll, despite knowing how proud it

would probably make him to tell her the exact details. She knew very well how reckless and uncaring for his own safety that Antares could be in the right situation – no need to go on encouraging that sort of thing.

“Mum, I’m not sleepy,” Antares said crossly, rubbing wearily at his eyes in a manner that contradicted his statement directly. “I’m just–”

“A little tired, I know,” Bella said, rolling her eyes. A flick of her wand, and the door was opening, just in time for Antares to half stumble into their room. More his than theirs now, but she wouldn’t think of that.

“And you’re not coming to bed, are you?” Antares accused, now heading for the rickety wardrobe in the corner. Bella smiled, watching him rummage through the few things he’d left behind, that tight feeling surfacing sharply in her chest.

“Not yet, darling,” she murmured, going over to aid his struggle out of the school robes he’d refused to take off all evening. As his shirt came off, Bella struggled not to stare; it looked almost like his burns had gotten a little larger –

“Ow,” Antares muttered, as she tried to gently feel the surface of the larger portion of the irregular stripe. “Don’t–”

“What do you mean, ‘ow’?” Bella demanded, blinking back her alarm. “Has your back been hurting again, or–”

“It has,” Antares yawned, sounding sleepier by the minute as Bella bent closer to examine the thick, irregular stripe that had been carved down his back by some nameless fire, during the two or three years she’d not had the chance to watch over him. “Well, been itching, but it did hurt a bit just now–”

“When I touched it?” Bella let her fingers skim the burn lightly, noting that Antares did not flinch again.

“I’m not really sure,” he replied, sounding a little confused. “It just itches, sometimes, and sometimes it hurts when I’ve been working hard or something.”



“But more than before?” Bella sighed as he nodded, filing it away as yet another thing to worry about, and possibly question Severus on. Her resolve to speak to him on the matter strengthened as she finally tucked Antares away into bed, smiling faintly at his weak protests all the way. Although she could hardly see how he would know what to do in such a situation, there would be no harm in asking.

Just as she was about to rise from her nearly unconscious seat on the bed, Antares’ sleepy voice stopped her.

“Mum? I was right about moving, wasn’t I?” Bella froze for a minute, then smiled, suddenly remembering that fearful conversation, the first one they’d shared in this house. “Wasn’t I?” The fond smile deepened into a more satisfied one as she leant over to press a kiss to Antares’ forehead.

“I suppose so,” she murmured softly, something seeming to relax within her. It occurred to her now that he had, in fact, been right. Perhaps a little more right than he might like in the future, as regarded her relationship with Severus, but – still.

Right was right. “Goodnight, Antares.”

“Night, Mum,” followed her out of the room, enabling her to shut the door softly and not feel quite as guilty as she did trooping down into the kitchen after looking in at Severus’ room to be sure of his location. It turned out that he was seated in the kitchen at the table that had featured prominently in their activities, both conversational and not, and was engaged in staring a little blankly at the open newspaper before him. Severus’ head shot up as she sat down beside him and gently touched an elbow, making her feel a little more uneasy. What could be so worrying as to leave him in such a state of tension?

Several answers presented themselves in the forefront of her mind, each more ridiculous than the last. Tenure would never be a problem for Severus, not with Dumbledore owing him an arm and a leg for his activities during the war in such a conspicuous manner, and he’d said nothing of problems with the other professors, or with the notoriously conservative school board at Hogwarts. Sighing, Bella reached for one of his idle hands, stroking it absently as she tried not to think of

the last time she'd seen something like that tense anticipation about him.

That option was more ridiculous than all the rest, despite what she knew of – of her former master. Bella sneered inwardly, familiar, cold satisfaction welling up in her at the thought of the Dark Lord's plans being foiled by the *Longbottoms* – by the youngest pair's one-year-old spawn, no less, if the tale was true – which she suspected was the contrary (the husband hadn't died for nothing, she was sure, and they had both been rather good Aurors, if she remembered rightly), but found bitter amusement in the fact that the rumours of the Longbottom boy's 'powers' held so true. Despite all the measures the Dark Lord had taken, Death had caught hold of him with cold, implacable hands and consigned him elsewhere – hopefully to the hell Maggie's few Muggle friends had muttered about in her hearing on occasion, during the long months of her recovery and the sporadic visits that followed afterward.

Bella shook her head with a sigh. It was no good dwelling on those bitter days, or on the bitter mess a few years of foolish choices had made of her life. She had new things now – a new life, almost. Even Severus, as mired in the past as he sometimes was, had a claim to that new life, as well as a claim to one of his own.

"You should be asleep, you know." Bella blinked, startled by the unexpected comment from the man beside her. "Beside your son."

"Yes," she said, a very slightly guilty smile tugging at her lips. "I'm hardly here for what you suppose I am, though." Not giving him a chance to respond – he was rather persuasive when he wished to be, and right now, Bella knew she needed to talk about the things that had been weighing on her mind, and thought he needed to do the same. "There are more pressing things on my mind than seducing you, you know. That business about the troll, for example – I still can't quite imagine what on earth Hogwarts must be coming to, with trolls able to penetrate the school defences."

Severus laughed, almost harshly. "Penetrate the defences indeed. A troll, to boot – less chance of that than of Potter's mangy ghost surfacing in my dungeons, of course." Bella's breath caught, just a

little. The way he sounded – “The Headmaster believes that the school is safe enough, though, so all my feelings must necessarily be rubbish.”

“Safe enough? Safe enough for what?” The bitter smile on his face fell somewhat, alarming Bella even further.

“I cannot say. No – don’t press me, I truly cannot.” He looked down at the still-open newspaper before them, slowly closing and opening his eyes. “I may simply be wrong, you know that.”

Bella watched him for a moment, her hand, which had paused in its activity as soon as he’d begun to talk, now continuing to stroke his. “It seems to me that you need to stop thinking about the situation,” she tried, knowing the chances of her advice being taken were slim. Most of the men she’d known were notorious for refusing to take advice, and Severus was – well – rather the sort to be inclined in that direction. Bella tried not to let the wry smile take her as she let her eyes drift over his scowl. Inclined in that direction, at the very least – “Come to bed, won’t you?”

Dark eyes caught and held hers for a long moment. “With you, or without you?” Bella bit her lip, considering. It just wouldn’t be safe – “Oh, forget it. I should have known—”

“Excuse me?” Bella demanded, blinking as Severus suddenly stood, all angles and anger again. She stood in turn, grasping firmly at his elbow as he made to step away from the table. “Oh, don’t play coy with me – you think I’m not serious about this, don’t you?”

“Is there anything else I should think?” Severus replied lowly, through gritted teeth. “I—”

“Severus, you are a fool,” Bella calmly informed him, stepping around his already moving form to bring them face to face. “Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing.”

“If you don’t wish to endure it, walk away,” he replied, more curtly than the desire and frustration Bella could see in his expression required. Rolling her eyes, she tilted her chin up at him defiantly, and was not very surprised when his arm slipped abruptly round her waist

and moved her closer. She sighed into his neck, wondering whether any relationship between them was destined to be this stilted whenever he was in a bad – “Bella? I – I understand you wish to be cautious, but–”

“You’ve always been impatient.” Severus didn’t refute the statement, and Bella sighed, finally giving in to the rising desire she could feel deep within as well, leaning forward to touch her lips to his.

“Stop doubting me, will you?” she murmured against his lips, enjoying the feel of his hands caressing her back and dipping lower, to caress her arse. “It begins to be very annoying.”

Severus nodded, a little awkwardly due to the close quarters, and set about thoroughly breaking their mutual resolution, first with a slow, searing kiss that reminded Bella of why she’d thought this a good idea in the first place, and then with an even slower consummation of their desire, behind the triply locked door of his room. Afterwards, as she drifted off into sleep, she reassured herself that this time was only because he was so troubled. They had to be careful, and they could both respect that from now on.

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Morning found her wearily extracting herself from the rather too welcome shelter of Severus’ arms in order to be in Antares’ bed to prevent further suspicion. Severus had almost smiled at her when she’d woken in slight panic and began to retreat, and that added to the thorough satisfaction she felt at falling asleep beside her son and waking up to the familiar pokes in the side – this time, from his own wand. Bella, though a little tired from how late she’d slept the last night, found herself well up to the challenge of trying to wrestle Antares’ wand from him, and felt more than tempted to stage a duel with him, to see precisely how good he was.

It had given her an almost disproportionate amount of pride to hear him talk of the useful things he’d learnt, and, as she finally swiped his wand from his protesting hands, she filed it away as yet another thing to talk to Severus about. Using her wand to cast any sort of masking field to prevent Antares’ magic from being detected would be horribly suspicious, and with Antares in such a prominent position as an

Apprentice in Hogwarts, it would not do for her to draw undue attention to herself. Particularly with Lucius and Narcissa's horrible little son in Antares' year, and with Lucius' distressing amount of ties in the Ministry – these things always got out somehow.

Besides, Bella thought, nodding in approval as Antares announced his intention to take a shower, it was Christmas week, and such a short holiday was better spent on rest and relaxation than on plotting ways of getting around the Ministry without drawing the notice of her many enemies. The summer holiday would be a much more appropriate time, if Severus agreed, for setting up masking charms and teaching Antares spells he needed to know.

"Antares? I'm going to see if Severus is using his shower – I'll need to be at work quite soon, so..." Antares gurgled something that sounded accommodating in reply, and Bella was soon shutting Severus' door for what had to be the fourth or fifth time that morning. "Still in bed?"

Severus turned over in answer, mumbling something vague. Smiling, Bella stripped, heading directly for the shower. Whether he would join her or not was moot this morning, of course – she had to be at Madame Malkin's earlier than usual today to help stem the tide of the Christmas rush, so coaxing Severus out of bed with a well-placed word or hand was out of the question. The shower and her hurried toilet were quickly done, despite the presence of Severus and his incorrigible taunts and hints during the latter, so when Bella made her way downstairs, it surprised her that the kitchen was not still empty.

On the contrary, Antares was flitting about, still looking rather sleepy. A somewhat ramshackle breakfast for two of hot scones and spreads was laid out on the table, and after staring in surprise for a moment or two, Bella sat down and helped herself to it with a will.

"Working early, then?" Antares asked a little uselessly, poking at the rather obviously burning bacon in the pan on the stove.

"Christmas rush," Bella said simply, declining to comment. She couldn't count how many times she'd warned him that eating badly done bacon was unhealthy, and didn't feel at all like openly worrying the issue again. "Is that bacon?"

"I know it smells burnt, but it's not," Antares said stubbornly, making her smile. "And anyway, I'm taking it off—"

"I just rather thought I'd like some," Bella said, not bothering to keep the amusement out of her voice. "No need, no need – it's obviously still not done, anyway." Antares' eyes narrowed at her for a moment, causing her to take an interest, once more, in her tea. "Anyway, I just wanted to ask, before I leave – hasn't Severus thought to teach you the *Adimo* yet? It is a little advanced, but since you've already mastered Disarming Charms so easily, it wouldn't hurt."

Silence reigned unexpectedly for a moment, causing Bella to look over at Antares. He was still stirring a little aimlessly at the bacon in the pan, but the look on his face was far more thoughtful than before. "Antares—"

"Snape's not the one who taught me the spells, mum," Antares said, a little quietly. "Don't you remember? One of the Professors at the tests—"

"So?" Bella said impatiently, not understanding. "Was it that new professor, or—"

"Yeah, Professor Quirrel. He's sort of one of the people that does my Apprenticeship stuff, so..."

"Ah," Bella replied, not overly surprised. Severus had said nothing of Antares being taught practical duelling spells, and probably couldn't have for a very salient reason. The way things were, he did have to distance himself from Antares at Hogwarts – it wouldn't be safe for any of them if he did otherwise. "Well, ask him about the *Adimo*, next time." Bella stood, absently directing a buttered scone or two into a foil wrapper in case she badly needed a break at work. Antares seemed to relax a little at the way she deliberately took no notice of the little situation, and it made her feel a little better about embarrassing him by kissing him goodbye as she prepared to Apparate. "Do be good today – it'll be a long while before I come home, tonight, what with the rush, and I'd rather not come home to see Severus' home in tatters," she said sternly, before languidly twisting her wand and feeling the familiar squeeze of Apparation.

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As Bella had thought, it was after her normal working hours by the time she could Apparate home, and even then, she was laden down with shrunken, irritatingly wriggling mannequins and several robes that needed rapid alteration before tomorrow morning, when most of them would be rush owled, Floo'ed, Apparated and even Portkeyed to panicky men and women after a cursory check by Madame Malkin, who had worked on many of these last-minute commissions herself. Bella, temporarily corralling the still-wriggling mannequins in a spot in the living room with a series of clumsy, but effective binding spells on the peripheral ones, decided she rather deserved a sit down and a spot of dinner before she tackled them and their accompanying bundles of showy fabric. After irritably *Stupefying* them when two or three of them wouldn't stop quarrelling and chipping away at each other, she headed for the kitchen, from which voices were emanating.

"What's it matter to you if I learn anything from him, anyway?" Antares was demanding vehemently, just as Bella opened the door. "He's a good teacher when he's not stuttering, so I don't see—" Antares paused, half-rising from the empty kitchen table as he caught sight of her. Severus, his back to the door as he ordered the cauldrons around in that familiar, jerky manner of his, pounced on the hesitation.

"You don't see because you don't understand," he said sharply, now decanting something that pleasant-smelling into one of their chipped serving-bowls with a fervour Bella appreciated because it meant a good dinner was not far ahead. "I know things—"

"He stutters because of you!" Antares burst out, slightly lower than normal only, Bella thought wryly, because she was in the room "He's afraid of you, there's nothing—"

"Antares, Severus," Bella could not stop herself from crossing to touch Severus' stiff shoulder, despite how suspicious it might look. "Good evening."

"Bella, thank Merlin," Severus muttered, dousing the fires dancing under the steaming cauldrons with a flat stroke of his wand. "He'll listen to you, at least—"

“Dinner first?” Bella said, interrupting as she saw the mutinous look on her son’s face. “We can talk over dinner as easily as we can speak standing, you know, and I am rather hungry...” Severus scowled slightly as she began to open the cupboards and levitate plates and eating things out without asking him, but didn’t refute her suggestion.

A few minutes later, they were all tucking into an enormously complicated stew to the accompaniment of the clinking of (slightly less tarnished) silverware and sullen silence from all quarters, and Bella had started feeling less ravenous and more hungry – enough to start the conversation again.

“Goodness knows I’ll be awake till late tonight,” she murmured, tearing off another piece off the already half-eaten loaf of warm bread she’d never quite stopped envying Severus for being able to make. Her bread was almost always flat or overdone, somehow – the order of the rising charms always seemed to muddle together in her head, ensuring several disastrous loaves and a tentative, sensible comment from Antares at the tender age of four years old that involved him wondering why they couldn’t just buy bad bread instead of baking it, the latter option always made her cross and tired her out. “I think I’ve got five orders to actually finish and fifteen to look over, or something close – it’ll be a long night and a long morning, I think, but I should be home well in time for lunch if all goes well.”

Severus grunted, and Antares got a very particular look on his face that meant he was going to try to wheedle something out of her – something she might not ordinarily allow him to do. Bella smiled inwardly and waited, dipping her chunk of bread in the rich stew with a sigh, and, soon enough –

“Mum? I was – I was wondering, could I meet my friends in Diagon Alley on Boxing Day? We sort of planned it, but I wasn’t sure–”

“Diagon Alley, you say?” Bella said, making her tone a little sterner than she actually felt about the issue, which actually sounded like just the thing to tire him out so – so some very desirable things could happen without his noticing. She stifled a smile before going on. “Not Knockturn?”



“Never,” Antares said, looking wonderfully honest in the way that usually signalled he was lying. Severus snorted, and Antares gave him a glare. “They’re my friends, Mum, I wouldn’t take them there, I know it’s dangerous—”

“I really wonder at your choice of reasoning sometimes, boy,” Severus said wryly, raising his eyebrows at him. “You seemed perfectly comfortable dragging that poor Zabini boy with you into your little, ah, *adventure* with that troll barrelling about the castle, didn’t you? I even heard you say that you specifically told him to charge into the rather dangerous troll-inhabited room right behind you. Unless you don’t remember – your memory seems to be quite poor in such cases, doesn’t it?” Antares reddened, and Bella had to stifle a smile – Severus had always been one for going to the heart of the matter.

And, besides, she did have quite a bit to say on that subject herself. “Now, Antares, I won’t deny that I was proud to hear of how you handled yourself in that situation,” Bella began, pretending to ignore the way Antares blushed and perked up proudly. “But I take serious issue with your going in the first place.”

Antares’ face fell. “But Mum, we thought Daphne Greengrass was—”

“The Greengrass girl’s sister is in your year, is she?” Bella commented. “That was a horrible excuse to set out – everyone knows that family has such bad luck—”

“As much bad luck as the Blacks?” Severus snidely pointed out. Bella grinned, unable to help herself.

“Not quite, but very, very close,” she said gravely, ignoring Severus’ further snort. “In any case, it was a bad idea – if you hadn’t known those spells or performed them properly, I might’ve been crying helplessly on Severus’ shoulder right about now.”

“That’s likely,” Antares said derisively, giving Severus a dark look that Bella knew didn’t bode well for his discovery of their relationship. “Fine, mum, I won’t go after trolls any more—”

“The casual manner in which he says that seems a little suspect to me, if I may say so,” Severus murmured, shifting his feet so they

brushed against Bella's under the table in a very familiar manner. "I wouldn't trust him."

"Oh, Mum, please—"

"Fine, you may go," Bella said, lips quirking again at her son's slightly desperate expression, as well as the feel of Severus' shoed foot stroking blatantly up her leg. "But make no mistake – if I catch you nosing about anywhere dangerous, or see you *not* getting to safety if something happens—"

"I'll be punished," Antares agreed quickly, looking vastly relieved. "I know, Mum, I won't try anything, I promise." Bella huffed a little, holding back a grin at the slightly sly look that had been in his eyes when she'd said 'anywhere dangerous' – at the very least, she knew he'd interpret that loosely, but stay away from the more unsavoury shops down on Knockturn to make sure she didn't technically have any reason to punish him if he and his friends were found there.

"Now, about your lessons with that Quirrel," Severus said firmly, setting down what little cutlery he'd been using, as well as ceasing his rather bold exploration of her under-dress. Antares scowled, but made no retort after a firm look from Bella. She fixed her attention on Severus' narrowed eyes firmly – after all, she'd only heard about the situation from Antares' point of view that morning, and would rather know sooner than later if he was doing something dangerous by being connected to the mysterious teacher. "You might think he is nothing more than a bumbling, stuttering fool with a penchant for defence, but there are things you do not understand, Antares – signs you have no experience in reading." Severus turned slightly towards Bella, the expression on his face earnestly condemning. "Quirinius Quirrel taught Defence the year before last. I admit," he said grudgingly, "that his instruction was up to standard, at that time, but now, he is made nothing more than a stuttering wreck."

"Wouldn't visiting somewhere like Albania do that to anyone else, Professor?" Antares argued fiercely. "I bet *you'd* be a wreck if you met something really nasty in Albania—"

"The fact that he went to Albania is not the point, boy," Severus snapped. "The important thing is that he changed – the Quirrel I knew

as smart, articulate, and perhaps a little stupidly shy is *gone*. From what I hear from the Headmaster, who quite rightly makes it his business to know these things, his mind is now a sightless maze of fear – a product of Dark experiences, perhaps, but precisely *what* experiences? No one knows what happened to him, and he, of course, conveniently refuses to tell and pretends that he does not remember–”

“Maybe he’s pretending because he’s afraid of you, you great git–”

“Antares, don’t be rude. Severus makes a good point – anything might have happened to the man. And with no proof and no eyewitnesses, even I am inclined to think that that anything was something rather unsavoury.” Antares scowled again, looking cornered.

“But mum, he wouldn’t teach me spells like that if there was something wrong with him, would he?”

“Of course he would!” Severus snapped, rolling his eyes at Antares stubborn, yet hopeful expression. “Did all that time rolling in the gutters of Knockturn make you foolish?” Bella shot him a sharp, meaningful look, causing him to steady his tone, but not much more. “Dark wizards seek to pass on the knowledge of their greatness – luring in someone like you with knowledge, forbidden or not, would be ridiculously easy.”

“You say that as if he’s Dark, Professor,” Antares complained. “Mum, you can’t believe him – Quirrel *isn’t*. He stutters and barely stands up to me in class, for crying out loud – sometimes, if I decide everyone should learn something and they back me up, he just gives in. Do you see a real Dark wizard doing that?” Bella sighed. It was only natural that Antares would be at least a little attached to Quirrel, for teaching him things he taught to no one else. There was a rather strong part of her son that thrived under that sort of attention – something he almost certainly didn’t get from Severus, and probably got from no one else at Hogwarts. For the first time, Bella found herself almost wishing she could be there at Hogwarts to protect him from people that would find it easy to manipulate him like that – as she herself had been manipulated. As so many had been manipulated –

“Antares, I’m sorry,” Bella said slowly. “But I am afraid things point rather in the favour of this Quirrel not quite being on the side of the good – you might have been mistaken about those classes, you know. Dark wizards thrive on deception – as a former Dark witch and disciple of such a wizard, I would know,” she said, pausing to give Antares a measured look, “and, whether you like it or not, so would Severus.” Antares bit his lip, glaring down at the table between them, but Bella continued anyway. “I understand it sounds far-fetched, but you could be in very real danger if you are wrong – you do know that?”

“Yeah,” came the sullen answer. “But–”

“No buts,” Bella said firmly. “Find a way to refuse those lessons – politely, of course, but I don’t want you going to them.” Seeing Antares’ expression become even more mulish and disobedient, she sighed. “I mean it, Antares – if I hear anything to the contrary from Severus–”

“Fine,” Antares said angrily, pushing his chair back from the table as he scooped up his plate and bowl with a scowl. “But I think you’re just being paranoid. It’s only Quirrel.”

“I don’t care,” Bella said frankly, sighing as she stood. “If we are wrong, you can apologise – he certainly shouldn’t mind, what with all the talk he probably stirred up by coming back in such a state.” Severus snorted, standing up with his usual grace and beginning to levitate the dinner things into the sink, sending them drifting round Bella and Antares as they made their way out of the kitchen. “Antares?”

“No!” he cried immediately, looking betrayed. “It’s not fair that I have to help–”

“Severus made dinner, Antares,” Bella sighed, feeling quite, quite tired as she caught sight of Severus’ grim, closed-off look. “If I didn’t have urgent things to attend to, I’d be helping–”

“Fine,” Antares muttered, pushing past her in that slightly rough way that meant there would certainly be argument on probably every matter they’d just discussed at dinner, most likely with a bitter refrain

of how Severus was ruining his life at school, just now. Bella sighed again, wondering if it would have been more beneficial to just let him traipse off and let him bother her while she was sewing, but the slightly relaxed look on Severus' face strengthened her resolve like nothing else.

She turned away and headed into the living room and straight for where she'd placed the little jostling group of mannequins, and, as she enlarged them to their proper sizes, wondered what exactly she'd gotten herself into by entering this odd relationship with Severus. She'd known long enough that Antares would always be a wildly difficult child to deal with if she wasn't careful to assert her authority, but had had time to accept it and even learn to miss it at points. But Severus – there was another difficult child become horribly difficult man, only with a seemingly unflappable layer of smooth calm and a fistful of denial to go with each rationalisation. Every personal defence of his was supported by precedent, every barrier by former unpleasantness.

Bella snorted, selecting the first bundle within reach and shaking out the dazzling fabric so she could drape it over the nearest mannequin. She did understand, to an extent, but it didn't mean she felt much like righting all his wrongs or some such nonsense. She'd realised, after the first few visits, just how fair she'd have to appear after a silly argument over how much time she spent on crafting her responses to Antares' letters.

Sighing, Bella turned her thoughts back to the subject at hand, and, after stepping back to observe the strange way the robe fell from the preening mannequin's shoulders, finally began to make some inroads in the long night of last-minute amendments.

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Bella groaned, waking up to something very warm and wet in a place she had recently and smugly become accustomed to having such generous things in, on or near. It took a few dazed, highly pleasurable minutes to realise that she was once again in Severus' bed, and a few more (as well as a startling little pinch to her bared nipple) to remember just what had ensured her presence there. By then, she

knew exactly what the warm thing was up to and was in no real frame of mind to hurry it up.

Unfortunately, the idiotic owner had different ideas. Bella made a vague, sleepy noise of dissent as a warm, familiar-smelling body wriggled sleepily up hers and as a mouth pressed a warm, damp kiss to her cheek.

“Severus, why did—”

“Got carried away,” he interrupted. The fool. *Of all the times to be talking, for goodness’ sake* – “It’s early.”

“So?” Bella muttered, slowly winding her arms and legs around the man above her, knowing he could be enticed into more than that tantalising little show and not really caring how dangerous or how scarring it could be for Antares to walk in and shriek and run away, and – oh no, was she laughing?

Oh dear.

“Did you get me drunk?” Bella asked quietly, in a minute, not bothering to open her eyes to see the probably derisive or disbelieving look on Severus’ face. He shifted on top of her in a manner she decided was guilty, and immediately wanted to punish. “You bad, *bad* man—”

“Bella, no matter what I – ah – did, you – oh – should leave. It’s too – oh, don’t—”

“Why?” Bella murmured, her mind only really on her current little exploration. She loved doing this, of a morning, and sometimes almost wished Antares would hurry up and find out so she had a legitimate reason to spend mornings trapping Severus in his bed –

“I’m supposed to – Bella, *please* – be – be – waking you up, not – oh...” Severus lapsed into a familiar series of groans for the moment, but, as soon as Bella stopped to take breath, somehow found the strength to begin again. “You have work to do this morning, for goodness’ sake!”

Bella stopped, sighing. “Oh no – I must have forgotten.” She sighed, finally letting go of Severus’ rather tortured parts with a frown. She groaned, rubbing carefully at her sleep-laden eyes. “Why I picked such a job is utterly beyond me, at this point – Christmas morning, of all times–”

“I was under the impression,” Severus commented wryly, his low voice following her out of bed, “that you didn’t have many options.”

“Too right,” Bella muttered, a little bitterness creeping into her voice as she began to frantically dig about for her robes in the darkened room. “Death Eaters don’t make good employee fodder, I recall. Probably why so many are dead or destitute.” She finally summoned her wand, knowing a self-applied cleaning charm or two would probably suffice for the particular situation she was entering into – Madame Malkin had made sure, sometimes by dint of threats and force, that every one of her staff would be home for Christmas lunch, even if it meant all of them coming in at five in the morning. She also added a non-nauseous sobering charm, just to be sure her overdeveloped sense of humour didn’t carry over into an arena in which it was most certainly unwelcome.

Severus snorted, stretching (enticingly. Damn him) on the bed. “That is, unless the fools were rich to start with, and escaped conviction. They muddle along just fine, then.” Bella felt a bitter smile cross her face, and couldn’t quite help going over to the bed to plant herself in his lap for one of those ill-advised morning kisses.

“You seem to have done quite well,” she whispered, carefully not into his face, wanting to nibble at his lip. “A house of your own–”

Severus chuckled. “A relatively large prison to knock about during the school year–”

“A mistress,” Bella added, voice seductively low as she licked that place on his ear that produced such–

“Mmm.” –satisfactory results. “Not averse to the title?”

“My mother,” Bella said, simply, drawing fingers down Severus’ back in a disjointed pattern of crosses, “told me to call things as they are.

When I finally started to listen to her advice, she was no longer my mother, but...it helped.” She paused, letting a wicked grin take up residence. “Not that I won’t bleed you to death over the kitchen table if I ever hear you call me that outside of this room.” Severus chuckled, eliciting a hard pinch from Bella to show that she was serious. “Really, I have precedent – one of Rosier’s brothers tried to tell me Black women were too mad to be wives, too randy to be nuns, and therefore could only be mistresses.”

“So that was why–” Severus paused, narrowing his eyes at her. “Kindly remove your hand from there this instant, Bella.” Bella pouted – he’d never been one to be taken in by distraction – but let her hand stay where it was and doing exactly what it had been.

“Why should you have to suffer with me? I don’t approve of leaving my patron in such sad deprivation, you know.” Severus sighed as she shifted in his lap, needing easier access to a particular location, but soon began to gently ease her off.

“I would highly appreciate such...sentiment at any other time, Bella, but knowing your son, such activity on such a morning usually devoid of sleep for boys his age is extremely–”

“Oh, *fine*,” Bella groused, standing and going over to the door, straightening her robes and hair along the way. “Rest assured, however, that you will be making this up to me in the most stringent manner this evening.”

“Oh, I don’t think that will be any problem at all, mistress mine,” was the sardonic reply as she opened the door. “If there are any owls for me from Hogwarts downstairs, just throw them in the fire, will you?”

“I’ll thank you to see to that yourself, you lazy young sot,” Bella called back. “The nerve of young men, these days...” Sighing to herself, she crossed the tiny hall, meaning to see if Antares was awake, only to be bombarded by the frantic flight of three obviously disturbed owls that shot through the door she’d just opened. “Antares, what on earth is going on?”



“I’m sorry!” hit Bella almost before a thoroughly excited Antares barrelled into her, smelling of dust and strange magic. “Happy Christmas, Mum! Are you all right?”

“Of course I am,” Bella replied, squeezing Antares into a short, heartfelt hug even as she ran a quick diagnostic charm over him. Nothing wrong, thank god – “What would make you worry?” Antares’ tight grip on her lessened somewhat, his expression becoming relieved.

“Severus said you were drunk last night, Mum,” he said, matter-of-factly, causing Bella’s eyes to widen. “I think it was the clothes you were mending, or something – Snape said he’d give you a hangover potion, or–”

“And he did,” Bella said firmly, knowing it wouldn’t quite do to vacillate about it in front of her son. Severus had said next to nothing about her being drunk in the first place, but the plain fact that she had no headache this morning was quite enough proof that he’d given her something preventative. “What were those owls doing in our bedroom, then?” Antares let go of her then, and began tugging her over to the small heap on his bed, obviously excited.

“Well, I know I’m not supposed to open the windows,” he began, tone beseeching, “but I was awake and I heard this pecking, and I thought–”

“Just show me the presents, you little liar,” Bella said, rolling her eyes. “I knew very well that you would open your window this morning,” she went on, lying blithely as Antares blushed and began to hunt about in the wrapping paper scattered here and there on his bed. It always helped to assert her omniscience with him every so often – “I just thought I’d allow it, it being our first Christmas morning here. But next time–”

“I won’t do it again, I promise,” Antares said hastily, thrusting a small, very old and very dusty-smelling book into her hands. “See, that’s from Tracey Davis–”

“Really?” Bella said, her voice lowering in interest as she perched haphazardly on the edge of the bed. “Is this – this looks like a grimoire, but so small–”

“Oh, it is, Mum – owner’s long gone and everything, but Tracey said it could be enlarged, and I don’t know any enlarging spells, so I was thinking–”

“*Engorgio maxima*,” Bella said, cutting Antares off with a wry smile. “I do hope,” she continued, dropping the now-enormous book into his excited hands, “that you wouldn’t seriously consider using magic out of school even if you knew the right spell.”

“Oh, Mum, but that restriction’s so stupid, especially for who we’re living with–”

“I didn’t mean,” Bella went on, pretending not to hear her son’s indignant tone, “that you mightn’t use magic here at home with proper precautions being taken. Only not without them, Antares.” Looking as abashed as he could while excitedly beginning to devour the first page of the ancient-looking book, Antares nodded. “Now, I’d love to stay, but I should definitely be off to work. Behave yourself, understand?”

“Yes mum,” Antares said automatically, his eyes now only for the open book. But immediately Bella began to shift and prepare to leave, he looked up, eyes anxious. “Are you really coming back at lunch?”

“Luckily, yes,” Bella replied, standing with a slight yawn. “Won’t be anything like last year, don’t worry – Malkin’s isn’t a pub, she can close the shop halfway through the day without anyone getting upset.” Antares nodded slowly, and she could feel his eyes following her as she left, only pausing to aim her wand amusedly in the direction of the still-open window and charm it shut. After that, it was only a matter of minutes before Bella had snagged a bottle of Butterbeer from the pantry and stuffed some fairly unhealthy biscuits into one of those strange transparent Muggle bags she’d never been able to do without, then corralled the sleepy mannequins and bundles of amended robes and Apparated to work in a thoroughly determined frame of mind. Madam Malkin might have promised to try her level best to let them go home early, but a big part of that would have to be

their own frantic effort, and Bella intended to supply every morsel of effort she could muster, just this once.

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Hours later, Bella staggered out of the Floo, feeling as if she'd just run a long, extremely pointless and horribly tiring race. One last-minute order had had to be torn down and reconstructed on the spot, and, Bella being the most experienced sewer, the task had fallen to her. Hearing voices nearby in the kitchen, Bella bit back a fervent curse on the Smith family – *never known anyone to be so fucking fixated on seams being the exact colour of primroses that they just have to have the whole bloody garment remade* –

“You’re just in time, Bella,” Severus said, as she moved slowly into the kitchen. “I was about to resort to desperate measures to stop your son from opening your presents...are you well?” With Antares, there was none of that distance – he rose from his seat at the already set kitchen table and half-guided, half-forced Bella into one opposite an empty plate. “How was work?”

“Horribly exhausting,” Bella said, gently moving aside the plate and cutlery in front of her so she could rest her head for a few moments. “All I can say right now is that the entire Smith family should be shot, down to the children – their disregard for others is implanted at birth, I swear...” Sighing, Bella allowed herself to lay her head down upon her arms. “I’d like a drink, if anyone wouldn’t mind fetching one. I certainly mind.”

Something heavenly and cool nudged at the side of her arm. “Here, mum. Butterbeer’s okay, right?”

“I could drink rat piss right now, if it was cold and in a glass,” Bella mumbled, rising slightly so she could reach out and actually drink the miraculously cold drink nearby. Severus rustled about nearby, and the sound of him opening his old oven stirred Bella into action. “I don’t suppose there’s anything to eat about this place—”

“Course there is,” Antares said impatiently. “Or there will be, if that chicken’s done—”

"It seems to be," Severus added, sounding oddly cautious. Bella would have tried to make more of an effort to put him at his ease again – probably wasn't often that he heard his supposed lover talking about rat piss with her son – but she simply couldn't be bothered. "Boy, be useful and help serve those potatoes instead of poking about in your mother's presents, for goodness' sake—"

"She likes me opening them," Antares argued, rustling and ripping at something nearby. "Don't you, mum?"

"If I hear that pitiful excuse again—"

"Severus, he's telling the truth," Bella said, interrupting what was most likely the beginning of an annoyed rant. "Really – he opens and reads everything to me all the time on days like this." Severus grunted and moved something about with a great deal more clashing than it probably needed, and Bella didn't need to sit up slightly and move her plate back into place to know that Antares was smirking over the small pile of neatly wrapped things before him that he was now tearing into.

*Men.* But, as Antares demonstrated by quickly rising to refill her now-empty glass, there was a reason to have them around, sometimes.

"There's a card from old Maggie, and some kind of packet of sewing-things," Antares began, as Severus began to (crossly) levitate steaming serving-dishes into their places on the table. "And I think *that's* got robes from the people at Madame Malkin's in it – there's a card too, if you're interested...? No. Well, from the weird signatures inside it, I think everyone you work with might've signed it, so you'll have to remember to thank them tomorrow. Oh, and Kreacher sent something, but Snape took it—"

"*Professor* Snape, darling," Bella chided, setting down the newly empty glass. "And Severus, I know the note's probably frightfully unhygienic in some way, but I do need to read it. As mad as that elf is, he does have guardianship over my aunt's old house in lieu of Sirius, so it'll likely be important."

“You mean the Ministry couldn’t take possession of the house?” Severus said, looking only a little mollified as he sat down just opposite her, sparing only a glare for the still-smirking Antares.

Bella snorted. “They couldn’t get past the wards, if I remember rightly. So they foisted it off on Sirius, which was the next best thing. If he dies in Azkaban, they might get it, if Narcissa’s spawn is not of age by then. Then again, blood-bonding does pass muster with the Black will, so even Antares here has a chance at the house.” Antares perked up noticeably, and, several minutes after they finally began to eat the small feast Severus grudgingly admitted to planning, went on to ask further about it.

“I’m eligible for Sirius Black’s fortune? Even without a birth date?”

“Oh, you’re registered,” Bella said, giving him a conspirational wink. “You were evidently born on May the 15th, I believe, well before that little brat of the Malfoys. Even if it doesn’t work, I intend to give my sister a well-earned fit during the dispute settlement.” At that, Severus finally smiled, and the general mood was much lighter after that.

Much later on, after working her way determinedly through the (rather delicious) meal and shamelessly ganging up to tease either Antares or Severus about their Christmas presents (for some reason, a large tin of very fine chocolate was among Severus’ surprisingly large Christmas stash, and after a glass or two of strong wine, Bella found it even more hilarious), Bella flopped into the threadbare couch nearest the fire and decided not to move for a large part of the evening. After a silly whispered argument or two as to who was disturbing her more, Antares and Severus finally retired to the kitchen and closed the door on their almost amusingly tense mutual study of the old Davis grimoire, and Bella dozed off to the counterpoint of a comfortably crackling fire and low, yet discernible voices from behind the kitchen door.

Bella woke up what felt like hours later to the feel of a hand squeezing determinedly in a very inappropriate place, and, stifling her exclamation, tried to strike back with a hopefully well-timed slap in the face. A few minutes later, after being summarily wrestled to the floor and groped in all sorts of delightfully unsavoury places while groping

in return, Bella broke off what was beginning to be a rather involved kiss.

“Bella—”

“Oh, don’t you dare complain,” she scolded, wriggling out of Severus’ grasping arms. “You were perfectly happy to do the same thing this morning, if you’ll condescend to remember.”

Severus groaned, sitting up with a mulish expression on his face. “Bella, it’s far too late for Antares to be up—”

“If I know anything about Antares, he would be,” was her firm reply as she regained the comfort of the couch. “He is most contrary on that kind of thing, I promise you.” Severus joined her, sighing, then commenced a rather sneaky attack on her robes, which were still askew. Rolling her eyes, Bella slapped at his encroaching hands. “Did you not hear a word I just said?”

Severus snorted. “Even if he’s awake—”

“No. Not until we’re behind a locked door, understand? I’m in no mood to go spoiling his perception of this holiday for him, all right?” Severus huffed and pinked a little, but soon fell silent. Bella, satisfied, decided she would relent. Eventually. “Not that this holiday hasn’t been exciting enough for him already, I think.”

“Hmm?”

“You mean you didn’t notice the little present mystery?” Paused in the attempt to sneak an arm around her, Severus only shook his head in dissent rather absently. “Well, I suppose I can hardly blame you – you weren’t early enough to see the owls that little idiot let in this morning.”

“Owls? I don’t—”

“Very early in the morning, when you were trying to waken me?” Bella asked pointedly, delighting in Severus’ slight blush at the memory. “Oh yes, *that* awakening – very pleasant it was, too, being awakened rolling in my own piss on the floor—”

“Bella, for the last time, I only told Antares that—”

“By now, you should know how imaginative he is,” Bella continued, pressing the point in a slightly pained tone. “You and your bloody understatement – he actually asked after my health this morning, as if I’d gone through ten bottles of Firewhiskey and not one—”

“You are doing this on purpose, aren’t you?” Severus accused, retracting his arm slightly. When Bella smiled wickedly in response, he huffed again and replaced it pointedly. “Just get on with the thing about the owls, if you please.”

“I do please,” Bella said, just to annoy him, before going on. “Well anyway there were three owls in his room this morning when I went in to check on him, and it was really quite obvious he’d opened his own window to them instead of leaving them to find the post portal down below.”

“That little sod. I specifically told him—”

“Severus, there’s only about a week left of his holiday. I assured him I would punish him, and that is that, at least for now. Please?” After a pleading look and a slight inching in his direction, Severus seemed to relent, and Bella went on expounding her pet theory of the moment. “So, three owls. But, from what he said at lunch, there were only two – the present from that Davis girl (which I thought was really rather generous) and *Quidditch Through The Ages* from the Zabini boy, as well as a few letters and cards from other acquaintances in his year. Three owls do not make sense, frankly – the letters all seemed to be from different people, if I heard him right, and for that, there would need to have been at least five owls fleeing his bedroom this morning.” Taking a breath, Bella rearranged herself in a position that was quite a bit closer to Severus than before. “What do you think?”

“What I think about his presents is irrelevant, Bella,” Severus said, his tone turned rather mocking, “what I think about your woeful disregard for your talent, however—”

“Disregard of talent?” Bella asked, wrinkling her brow. “I actually think I was *quite* astute in determining all that, thank you—”

“Too astute, I think,” Severus replied, shooting her a sharp little smile, “Enough that you forgot the point where you used Legilimency to find out the answer and consequently stopped your brain from needing that rather torturous little process to find out the machinations of an eleven-year-old.”

“Oh, fuck you, Severus,” Bella said, rolling her eyes. “Not everyone has your blatant disregard for rules—”

“And isn’t that the hearth calling the stove incendiary,” Severus said, smirking at her in his most irritating manner.

“Oh, shut up,” Bella muttered. “He *is* my son, you know – if that doesn’t count for some sort of nominal privacy—”

“Do you even use Legilimency any more, Bella?” Severus demanded wryly. “No? Occlumency, then...?”

“Of course.” Bella rolled her eyes. “Even if Legilimency is sanctioned by the Ministry, that’s hardly enough to keep die-hards like you practicing it on a poor, unsuspecting witch like me, is it?”

Severus sighed, shaking his head in an obvious parody of disappointment. “I had no idea you subscribed to the sort of tripe that says reading minds is illegal, I really didn’t—”

“Oh god, not this argument again—”

“You are in my home,” Severus insisted, drawing close enough that his breath warmed her neck, “and therefore, must listen to *every* of my opinions—”

“And some would call my unmarried cohabitation with you tantamount evidence that I must be your mistress, Severus,” Bella shot back, biting back a smile at his slightly crestfallen look. “If you wish to find me on the couch again, there will be no more mention of Legilimency and my son’s name in the same conversation, do you understand?”

“You really are a spoilsport for former adherent to such a Dark, deviant movement,” Severus grumbled loudly. Of course, his sentiment, though he seemed to think it bore repeating again and



again throughout the entire evening, never came close to actually defying her half-joking mandate. Later on, when Bella looked back on it, she would cringe a little at the thought of his almost unhealthy desire to let nothing spoil their...relationship, but for now, all she did was smile smugly at him and, after locking the doors behind them, protecting themselves with the necessary contraceptive Charms (a habit that would probably never leave her, now that all was said and done) and concocting a suitable story to feed Antares the following morning, drag him contentedly into his bed.

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*A/N: No idea why it took so damned long for this to get out, but it's here. I apologise with leaving you with a sort of implicit cliff-hanger, but I really thought it was best that way, leaving you all to fill in the blanks of the rest of our characters' holiday. The next chapter should pick up (just so you know) from the end of the holiday. Oh, and the contest on my LJ is, like, totally over in a day or so after the posting of this chapter, as I've practically handed you the most obvious hints on a platter. Unless everyone still doesn't get it, I'll just flat out announce the winner/the actual sort-of-spoiler, and to the victor will go the spoils. Or not.*

*Oh, and sorry about any formatting/spelling issues – this is pretty much straight from my laptop at 2:30 AM, so plz to be forgiving.*

## **Chapter 16: Defence Against the Blind Arts**

Antares had had intimate experience with bad luck before. There had been the horribly memorable incident down at the Dragon's Breath pub, with the cool, almost dead eyes of the vampire following him long after he'd made his escape. And there had been several periods in his life where all had just gone wrong for him, for no reason he could divine – his burns would awaken for a day or even a week, and would distract him with painful twinges at inappropriate times, or he'd start flubbing steals for no real reason and seem barely able to keep his magic in check, or his mum would have one of her vigilant fits and watch his comings and goings with narrowed eyes, preventing him from getting to do anything *fun*. Then there were the horrid days at Hogwarts, when Draco's insults seemed to be more on-target than usual, or when participating in Quidditch practice didn't result in his ending up on a broom, but in Flint yelling at everyone and calling him a bloodsucking, freeloading cunt for not looking in the right direction for the third time.

Nothing had ever been this bad.

Bella and Severus' strange, garbled conversation continued to echo in his ringing ears even as he stumbled up the stairs and into his room, shutting the door and swiping off the cloak and stuffing it frantically into a place he hoped, he really *hoped* his mother wouldn't look.

*"Fuck you, Severus,"* Antares kept hearing, over and over, *"Not everyone has your blatant disregard for rules –"*

Antares, starting to breathe a little harder than normal, wandered over to his bed and sat down, trying to think logically. It was good for him, to sit and try and be calm and not panic over the thought that someone might take his new cloak away from him just by looking inside his head in some bizarre –

"Fuck," Antares swore, softly. For a long moment, he considered locking the door, but realised it would do no good. If Bella came up for the night, a locked door would only make her feel surer that he was guilty of something. And if Snape came –

“...reading minds is illegal,” Antares had heard, and now, he remembered very well Snape had called it tripe. He wouldn’t hesitate, then, if he knew Antares was hiding something. He’d just pick up his wand and fix his horrible dark eyes on him and *know* –

“It’s not fair,” Antares whispered to himself, knowing he was shaking his head and curling in on himself in a very childish way, but not being able to help it. It *wasn’t*, honestly – how was he to have known an Invisibility Cloak would get sent to him? It was the last thing he’d think of getting for Christmas from anyone he knew, and he didn’t fool himself by thinking someone had sent it to him on purpose – the rambling, nearly incoherent note that had come with it had certainly not mentioned *him* – but it was hard to have watched it slip out and felt it in his hands and seen the rippling silver folds cascade just so when he let it fall. It was hard to have felt and seen and, despite the note, feel oddly as if it was his; all that, and not want to keep it. And if Antares knew anything, he knew his mother would be the last person to let him keep an Invisibility Cloak, priceless or not, from some mysterious, unknown source, no matter how vague and not-directed-at-him the letter had been.

Antares rose quickly, heading for the small stash of wrapping paper in his trunk. He knelt quickly before it, his heartbeat thudding hard in his ears as he tried hard to listen for footsteps just in case, as he opened his trunk. His fingers found the heavy parchment of the letter almost before he knew what he was looking for, and Antares sat back, straining his eyes, not caring how dark it was or how dangerous it was to read this *again*, so openly in his room, when Snape and his mother were discussing reading minds and secrets downstairs.

Still, he read. Slowly, out loud, and to himself. *There are wizards who cannot forgive themselves. There are many reasons for subjecting oneself to shame, to remorse, even when its other participants are long gone. Perhaps this resource will be lost, and perhaps not, but a wizard may not keep what is not his in trust for another, when that other is gone, and by his hand – by his failure. To your fathers may this gift, this sacrifice go. May it be found again, in need, in use. To forgiveness, this is sent. But not to forgetfulness – a shamed wizard must remember*

And there it blotted off, narrow, loopy handwriting that Antares had never seen before in his life. He folded it away, still puzzled, still wondering, and hoped selfishly that he never saw that handwriting again in his life.

As selfish as that felt, it strengthened him to know that he'd decided, finally, what to do with the cloak. His cloak, if he tried his best and played his cards right and – Antares flinched – lied to Bella with a straight face. But, looking at the corner of the room where the cloak slept, unseen, there was nothing else he wanted to do. Nothing he wanted to hold on to more, apart from his wand, maybe. *No*, Antares thought, *I'll keep it, whatever I have to do.*

Just like that, as he stashed the letter, slipped away from his trunk and climbed into his empty bed, the great mass of want and hope and possibility hit him. All the thoughts he'd been stifling all day seemed to dance a merry, overwhelming circus through his head – thoughts of playing pranks with Blaise, sneaking out of Slytherin whenever he bloody well felt like it, maybe finding a way into the Restricted Section to read that book that idiot Bletchley had taunted him about in Quidditch practice that last time. It was a long time before Antares could get the nervous grin off his face and go to sleep, and even then, he crept out of bed one last time to just make sure the cloak was still there, before he allowed himself to curl up and close his eyes.

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Morning dawned, and when Antares rolled over to see that his mother was not there, he felt a fierce joy seep into him. He rose quietly, moved softly to his hiding place, and tried not to smile too hard when he felt those soft, silvery folds again. It was stupid, he knew, that touching the stupid thing made him smile even when it might be taken from him any moment, but – well, that was what it did. No getting around it – might as well be accepted, if he really wanted to try to hold on to the Cloak.

"The Cloak," Antares said, firmly, to the empty room, a smile twitching at his lips. He could get used to calling it that. With a guilty peek and another smile, he hid it again, marvelling at how it folded so *small*, then went to his half-open trunk again, determination welling in him from last night. If he was going to keep this thing, this – this Cloak, he

had to try to understand who it came from, and why, just in case. Antares dug out the letter and, eyes shifting to the door every few minutes, read and re-read until the loopy little words blurred before his eyes and they jabbered in his head, the phrase, '*to forgiveness, this is sent*' repeating over and over again. Finally, when he caught himself staring at the final blot and wondering if there were words inside it, he folded the note and put it away, retrieving a scrap of parchment and a quill and some ink in its place.

*The list*, he wrote down slowly, thinking hard. There were so many things he might have to do to find out what Legilimency entailed, and how to block it, but Antares knew he would go nowhere fast (and in utter panic) if he didn't try to force some kind of order to his search, at least for now.

1, he wrote, cautiously, *Flourish and Blott's*. Antares sighed as he finished the last word, but knew it couldn't be helped. Flourish was the best bookshop he could afford to go to in London, and the extra expense of buying anything there obviously went to getting clerks that didn't glare at you (well, that didn't glare at you if you looked like you had *some* money) or sneer when you asked for help finding a book. Blaise wouldn't have bothered to lie about their superior service, as well, and anyway it had to be Antares' first option because Bella's eye would be on him, Blaise and Tracey for at least the first few minutes during the outing this afternoon, and she'd note where they went and recognise if he was already dragging them down Knockturn so early in the day.

2, Antares continued, *The Bell and The Book*. It was the least frightening bookshop on Knockturn, with only a rather shabbier look and feel to it rather than the air of menace that coated places like Borgin's, and it would probably have the same stock as Flourish, if quite a bit cheaper. And by then, Antares would know what he was looking for, or at least he hoped he would.

*Ormerall's Order-All*, Antares wrote quickly, next to the tentative 3 he put down next, and that would be his last resort. Getting a book or two on Legilimency owed to him would be horribly expensive, but if he couldn't find one elsewhere, it would have to do. And anyway, there was always digging into the tiny bag of Galleons he'd saved

from the first trip to Gringotts with Snape – surely, that would be enough for one or two solid books about defence against Legilimency, especially put together with the astronomical sum of seven Galleons that Bella had seen fit to send him for Christmas.

The list finished for now, Antares sat back, chewing on his lip as he looked it over. It didn't look suspicious at all, in his opinion – if found, Bella or Snape would probably think he was just listing shops he'd visit today. Coupled with the thought that they couldn't possibly already know what he was planning to do or learn to protect his ownership of the Cloak, Antares felt quite safe in folding and tucking the piece of parchment into the pair of trousers he'd likely be wearing today, among other things, and, after a whispered, slightly panicked admonition to himself to *not think about the Cloak*, Antares was soon banging out of his room and downstairs into the kitchen with a somewhat forced cheery smile on his face and his head carefully full of meeting Tracey and Blaise.

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"It's been absolutely charming meeting with your friends, Antares, but I simply must be off," Bella said, her familiar intonation reassuring Antares momentarily that the strange woman – the same that had accompanied him to Platform Nine and Three quarters on that first journey on the Hogwarts Express – that was smiling pleasantly down at him was really his mother. Blaise and Tracey nodded politely as Bella moved quickly away, leaving them standing just in front of Flourish and Blott's as she ducked past a group of giggling girls into Madame Malkin's.

Then, as Antares had been half-expecting since he saw that confused look on Blaise's face once introduced to Antares Black's Mother, Blaise gave Antares an obstinate look and opened his mouth.

"That's not your mum," he said bluntly, narrowing his eyes at Antares when he looked down at his feet.

"It's not?" Tracey said, immediately fixing Antares with a curious look of her own. "But –"

“Your mum’s got darker hair, for a start,” Blaise said, barrelling away at Antares without even a reply to Tracey, “*and* she’s a bit scary – that woman’s got nothing on her –”

“Will you even let me try to explain?” Antares asked, cutting in with a scowl on his face. There was no *time* for silly arguments like this – “She wears a glamour when she’s with me, now –”

“Does that mean she has enemies?” Tracey asked eagerly, lowering her voice to an excited whisper. “Because –”

“Not exactly,” Antares said, rolling his eyes as he cut Tracey off. “It’s just – she hasn’t had an exactly innocent life, so –”

“So she has enemies?”

“Well for someone with enemies, she’s very open with her real name,” Blaise said shortly, getting that faraway look Antares was quickly learning to dread as his Look of Searching Meanings Out, “and apparently, it’s –”

“Blaise, for god’s sake, shut up!” Antares hissed, latching hold of his fiendishly thinking friend’s arm. “There’s a bloody reason she uses one, all right? And it’s not one that means you can go shouting her bloody name on the street for everyone to hear –”

“Why aren’t you grabbing Tracey, then? She was the one going on about enemies –”

“But Blaise, obviously –”

Ignoring them both, Antares seized hold of Tracey and dragged the pair of them through the ragged crowd in front of Flourish and Blott’s storefront. That done, he simply let them go and began to head for the loudest, most frequented section of the shop (which, incidentally, turned out to be the area around the shelf on Silencing Magic). As he’d expected, both of them followed him, obviously bursting to sound him out about his horrible treatment of them.

“Antares Black,” Tracey began, catching up to him first, “if you *think* –”

“I got an Invisibility Cloak for Christmas,” Antares whispered quickly, noting that no one in radius was even giving them a second look.

“And if you expect us to believe *that* –” Blaise began, but Antares was already thumping down in one of the small, rather uncomfortable seats in the section and busily extracting a tiny bit of fabric from his pocket in about as discreet a manner as he could. Blaise’s eyes bulged as he caught sight of Antares’ fingers and some of his leg disappearing in short bursts as he tugged out more of the Cloak, and Tracey let out a gasp that made Antares cringe for just how loud it was.

“Shut up and get us something to hide behind,” Antares whispered furiously in both directions. Tracey was first to cotton on, heading off in a rather twitchy manner to lug down a rather large book with a blank, grey silk cover. Blaise followed suit as Antares surreptitiously stuffed and slid the corner of the Cloak back into his pocket, actually levitating down a rather colourful book that seemed to be filled solely with engravings of the letter S. Somehow, in the next few minutes, Antares managed to let both of his friends know that he wanted to sit on the floor in an area just as noisy as this, but with far less suspicious eyes watching them – the children’s section. One by one, Blaise, Tracey and Antares browsed nervously in that direction, Antares sweating and only able to hear his pounding heart for half the age it seemed to take them to get there, and seeing people staring at his pocket for the other half.

When they were finally tucked in an especially noisy part of the children’s section against a shelf of singing books, Antares finally nodded, and let them open the various books they’d all picked up along the way and begin to discuss them.

Or rather, discuss the Cloak.

“You’re having us on,” Blaise said tersely, after a minute or two of him and Tracey sneaking stealthy looks at the pocket in question. “You’ve got to be –”

“Read this,” was all Antares had to say, as he stuck out his tongue and had a rummage in his patchy robes for a copy of the note that had come with the cloak. He’d only just had time to make one before



this outing, and was rapidly regretting that as Tracey and Blaise fought and nudged each other to bend their heads over it.

“But it doesn’t make any flipping *sense*,” Tracey bit out, sounding frustrated. “You –”

“Don’t think I didn’t notice that, Trace,” Antares said, cutting her off. “How many bloody times do you think I have to have read and re-read that? I know very bloody well it doesn’t make sense.” Blaise said nothing, peering closely at the hastily copied note and muttering things under his breath. “Any idea what it means, Blaise?”

“I’m not sure,” was the immediate answer, “but –”

“I don’t think either of us really cares, Blaise,” Tracey said, nudging him encouragingly.

Blaise looked dubious. “It’ll sound stupid...”

“Not as stupid as the idea that it was sent to me by Father Christmas sounds,” Antares muttered. “And believe me, that’s the most workable thing I can think of to explain it. If your idea’s any stupider, I’ll burn the thing myself.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Blaise said, a slightly pleased undertone colouring his otherwise grudging answer. It made Antares exchange a sly look with Tracey – Blaise was always fond of expressing his ideas, and this instance of his love of doing so brightened Antares’ still rather gloomy outlook on the whole issue of actually getting somewhere on why on earth the Cloak might’ve come to him, despite everything. “Antares, you said you couldn’t think of anything to explain it, right? Well, let’s say there isn’t – that it wasn’t sent to you on purpose –”

“I thought of that,” Antares said, wishing he didn’t have to interrupt, “and it’s obvious, but if it’s true, then who was sending it and who were they sending it to? They don’t mention anyone, I mean – they don’t even finish the fucking note –”

“And that’s where my stepdad comes in,” Blaise said, with a slightly knowing look. “I’ve told you he’s mad for broom modding, yeah, but I didn’t mention just *how* mad. He wrote a book on –”

“As much as it pains me to ask,” Tracey began, rolling her eyes, but Blaise held up a placating hand.

“I swear, Tracey, I’m on point,” he insisted, giving them both appealing looks. “My stepdad did research into brooms and the practice of giving them as gifts – I *know*, Tracey, I’m getting to it – and he turned up something really funny that he put into one of his books.” Tracey rolled her eyes and started to say something, but was wisely cut off by Blaise. “When Quidditch players died as a result of their injuries during games, sometimes their – er – their brooms sort of, I don’t know, retained a little of their essence...” This time, Antares rolled his eyes. Good Lord, the *tales* people came up with – “...so members of their family would pass the brooms down and stuff. Sometimes, if no one from their family was present or known at that point, someone would keep the broom in trust for a year, and if the unknown family members or relations didn’t come up, they’d publicly post the broom in a way that would make sure that the descendants or relatives of the person would get it. Now, obviously, if the person didn’t have any, the owl would go to their grave, or if they didn’t have one, the site of their death. It was really popular at a point, even with brooms that didn’t have people die or get hurt on them –”

Tracey groaned. “Blaise, for goodness’ sake –”

“I’m getting to it! The spell on the owl and the broom had to have the sender – the trust person, that is – repeat some words in public as part of it, before sending it off. The thing is –”

“Don’t tell us you remember some 12th Century postage ritual word for word, Blaise, or I’ll –”

“I said it was stupid, all right? All I’m saying is, some of the words in this remind me of how the chant went. And before you say anything, Tracey, I only remember the bloody thing because it sounded depressingly stupid – all self-insults and vowing that the witch or wizard keeping the broom in trust wasn’t trying to steal the dead person’s glory or possessions away from their real family and all that,

while at the same time they were holding a big public ceremony and charging people to come watch!”

Privately thinking he'd probably have been on the side of the enterprising trust people – the sheer thought of doing something like that with Dangerous Dai's broom was quite enough to convince him, thanks – Antares decided to put a stop to the pending argument.

“Look, you guys, this isn't even the point,” he said, swatting at both of them with a small book on *Hymns for Holy Little Wizards* a little harder than was necessary. Ignoring their glares, he continued to speak. “The real problem is keeping Snape from finding out.” Silence erupted for a moment, making Antares want to sigh, long and hard.

“That shouldn't be too hard,” Tracey finally said, a little weakly.

Blaise snorted. “If we don't actually ever speak of it again, yeah –”

“That's not even the problem, all right?” Antares hissed, waving *Hymns* in a threatening manner as the two of them eyed each other and opened their mouths to disagree with each other's comments. “The problem is Snape knows how to read *minds*!”

Tracey's eyes widened, and Blaise tried very hard to look disbelieving, but only looked quite the opposite. “How do you know?” he said defensively, looking a little embarrassed. “That's only something the older years tell everyone –”

“My mum told me,” Antares said, lying, in his opinion, only a little. She'd told Snape, and in Antares' hearing range, and that was quite enough for him to believe it – Snape wasn't the kind of man you accused of that sort of thing falsely. And anyway, it had seemed and felt too true and too like the bloody Professor to be otherwise; since getting into Hogwarts, Antares had gradually developed a strong feeling that Snape saw through all his lies quite easily, and the new information explained it.

And, by the frightened looks his friends were giving him, they believed it just as easily as he did.

“Burn it,” Tracey blurted out, eyes glazing over a little with fear. “God, can you *imagine* what he’d do when he found out? He’d confiscate it so fast –”

“Of course he can’t burn it,” Blaise scolded shakily. “He’ll sell it instead – won’t you, Antares? They’re so bloody expensive nowadays, too –”

“No,” Antares said firmly.

“No?” Tracey squeaked. “Well just owl it to him, then! Taking it back to Hogwarts is as good as handing it to him gift-wrapped, you nonce –”

“And don’t get any ideas of giving it to your mum,” Blaise said, rather accusingly. “She’d give it to him, wouldn’t she? She’d probably feel all *obligated*...” he trailed off into silence, shaking his head at the last word like it was some sort of crime. Antares rolled his eyes. What on earth did they take him for, anyway? Despite the fact that he had an inkling that Bella did feel rather, er, obligated to Snape, he doubted she’d just hand such a priceless item over to him without some serious negotiation. She’d be most likely to take it and hoard it herself, anyway –

“I’m not giving it to *anyone*,” Antares said finally, as firmly as he could.

“But –”

“What I was thinking,” Antares continued, ignoring Tracey’s indignant cry, “was that I could learn how to block the mind-reading thing. From Snape, you know?” Tracey stared at him like people stared at madmen, and Blaise began to shake his head. “Look, I don’t think it’s actually that hard, all right? I was nervous as hell going down to breakfast this morning because of him, and all I did was just not think about –”

“Wait a minute,” Blaise said, narrowing his eyes at him. “Did you just say breakfast this morning?” Antares reddened, suddenly realising his slip, and Blaise crowed triumphantly. “See, Tracey, I *told* you they were living with Snape –”

“Oh shut up gloating, Blaise,” Tracey snapped, looking a little put out. Antares sighed, fighting the urge to put his head in his hands; he never seemed to be able to keep even the simplest things a secret from these two – “Just let him finish, all right?” Blaise sobered up immediately, and Antares sighed again, preparing to speak. “And don’t think you’re not going to tell us how that happened, Antares – we’re going to have a long, long talk about it soon enough.”

“Fine, all right? *Fine*,” Antares said crossly, when they gave him disbelieving looks. “Look, it’s not like I do it because I want to –”

“We know, Antares,” Blaise said, cutting him off with a roll of his eyes. “You were saying about breakfast?”

Antares gave him an accusing look, but continued anyway, explaining how he somehow thought only of meeting with the both of them throughout the entire meal, and how he’d seen Snape exchange an arch look with his mum just before they left and how he’d said something cryptic about ‘no chance of that’ when Bella had laid down the usual ‘don’t get in trouble’ rule. Blaise smiled knowingly for a moment, but Antares ignored him, now listing out all he’d heard about Legilimency and Occlumency, and how he thought that was what they called the mind-reading and the way to block it. After a fevered argument, they all decided that Tracey’d ask the store clerk what it was all about (she lied the best under polite circumstances), and have her try to buy or order the book with the bag of galleons Antares reluctantly handed over.

And then it was actually happening. Looking profoundly silly, Tracey nonced up to the nearest, most frazzled clerk and asked carefully about beginners’ guides to Occlumency. Feeling dizzy with the nearness of it, Antares lay in waiting with Blaise, following the irritated clerk as he showed Tracey increasingly shabbier-looking books with mysterious sigils and characters drawn on them. After an age or two, Tracey appeared to choose two of the least shabby books, and Blaise and Antares watched with bated breath as she pottered after the clerk to the till and handed over some money. Antares bit his lip, watching the blurred, slightly obscured exchange – he couldn’t see how much she’d given him from this distance, and he was suddenly afraid that she mightn’t have enough to get what they needed.

“D’you think I gave her enough?” he whispered, to Blaise.

Blaise gave him a Look. “Even if you didn’t, she’ll cover it, won’t she? This is important.”

“But I don’t want to owe her anything,” Antares said, shoulders sagging as he watched Tracey nonce out of the shop door.

“Why? So you can make sure she hasn’t got a right to use your Cloak?” Blaise said, a little belligerently. “God, you’re so weird about money – if that’s how it is, *I’m* buying refreshments, all right? I mean great pranks to come from that Cloak, I tell you.” And before Antares could say anything to dissuade him, Blaise was off, striding off through the thickening crowd within the shop. Cursing himself with feeling, Antares followed, feeling both sheepish and irritated. It was just like Blaise to think up such a load of tripe on a whim, and have it be sort of true.

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Despite the niggling, panicky feeling that Antares carried with him for about half an hour after Tracey’s purchase at Flourish and the fact that they hadn’t even thought to shop around and maybe try Knockturn Alley for a cheaper price, it all turned out quite well in the end. After being dragged into Florean Fortescue’s ice cream shop by his friends, Antares had only just loosened up and stopped plunging his hand down his pockets every few minutes just in case when Bella walked in, a rather worried look on her face. It turned out that she would be far too busy to keep much of an eye on them that afternoon, and therefore would rather they disbanded their little outing in twenty minutes.

Antares, practically melting with relief that they’d bought *some* reading material on Occlumency at all, covered his rising mood with an accusing expression and a sulky, rapidly whispered argument with his surprisingly contrite mother. Which ended in her slipping him an extra Sickle or two out of guilty pity, and added to Blaise and Tracey’s pocket money, enabling them to buy a veritable cartload of sweets between them. As the trio waited for Bella to hurry out of Madame Malkin’s to see them off to the Leaky Cauldron to Floo home safely,

Antares swore at least ten oaths of secrecy to Blaise and Tracey on the matter of sharing The Cloak with them.

Combined with everything else, the silly grins on the faces of Antares' friends as they finally parted company was worth his discovery of the plethora of sweets they'd somehow stuffed into his smaller-looking bag, along with the reassuring weight of the shrunken books in his pocket. Not to mention the hurried lecture on stealing and Blacks that he got from Bella on returning home, despite how many times he told her that he hadn't stolen anything on the trip at all.

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The rest of the Christmas holiday seemed to whip by strangely, time flowing past like a lumpy soup, with great clumps of slow stretches when Antares thought he would go mad from cycling an endless string of thoughts about Quidditch and his friends through his brain, and too-thin bits of venturing here and there about the house under The Cloak. Antares finally convinced Bella of the fact that he hadn't stolen anything on the Boxing Day trip with Blaise and Tracey only to be caught swiping Severus' nifty watch from right under his big greasy nose in the kitchen a few hours later.

Antares tried to feel guilty during the quite serious talk he'd gotten from Bella at that point. He gave up after fifteen minutes, pasting a tired, serious look on his face and trying to cycle through dull thoughts of studying Astronomy and History of Magic while repeating the occasional "Sorry, Mum" and "I know, Mum". Bella gave up just before dinner, complaining that she had work to do, and when Antares saw her sneaking a bottle of Firewhiskey from the pantry, he did feel guilty.

Well, only until he'd snuck past her and up the stairs into his room, and stealthily occupied himself with memorising every detail of the covers of the books Tracey had bought with the aid of wand light and the calming influence of a good piece of toffee. Antares eventually heard Snape tramping up the stairs to his drafty old room, and forced himself to hide everything immediately as quietly as he could. As the sound of Snape's slightly slurred grumbling – *hmm, Snape, on Firewhiskey? Nah, have to see it to believe it* – Antares bit his lip, and

wondered when and where he could learn some kind of charm to use to, er, conceal the sound of his activities.

It took two Long-Lasting Lollygags and a frustrated hour's read before Antares, finally satisfied that there was nothing really helpful in his current Charms textbook on noise-limiting charms, allowed his tired arms and legs to drag him back into bed, his eyelids heavy with frustration and a strong desire to get out The Cloak just for the hell of it.

It was, therefore, rather shocking to wake the next morning and find Bella stirring sleepily beside him, muttering about how he better not forget anything important in the house, as his poor mother would be too busy recovering from her hellish week at Malkin's to find anything but the fridge. Antares, quite forgetting about The Cloak, Snape's evil mind-reading abilities and even the Lollygag he'd been fuzzily thinking of having this morning, ran right downstairs and made the messiest, unhealthiest fry-up he could think of, and forced his blinking mum to eat close to every scrap of it.

From then, the hours passed by like the cold, whipping wind that howled irritatingly down the chimney, and Antares found himself too busy cheerfully playing tag with Bella and trying not to irritate Snape to bother thinking much about the fact that he'd be going to Hogwarts the next morning. Letters came unusually late because of how windy and cold it was – almost after lunch – and they took up even more valuable time, as did dozing off by the fire while Bella tacked and cursed the squirmy mannequins over by the saggy couch in the living room. Quite suddenly, Antares found himself being led up to bed yet again, and soon found himself waking up and having mere minutes to frantically stuff away the most important things he'd gained during the holiday in his robe pockets and schoolbag while Snape sneered and popped in at horribly uncomfortable moments throughout the process of getting his scattered belongings all stuffed back into his trunk.

Thankfully, Bella roused herself enough to accompany Antares and Snape to King's Cross for the early train back. She even made polite conversation with an even wearier looking Professor Sinistra, who laughed when Antares asked her if she'd been to another conference lately. And when it was time for Antares to hop on the train, it was a



lot easier not to cling to Bella a little longer than usual and say goodbye with a smile that wasn't forced, and that somehow gave Antares hope for the weeks ahead of him – long weeks of secret dealings and mysterious new concepts he had to learn.

Unfortunately, whatever god that watched over travel was not listening. Antares, stretched out a little uncomfortably on one side of the compartment he was sharing with the two other Apprentices, thought he had never had such a horrible train journey in his life. It was bad enough making small talk with Adrian and Charles, the former still being a bit prickly over the whole business with condolences and as likely to berate Antares as to ignore him. But what made it so nerve-wracking was the possibility that Snape might pop his batlike arse through the door at any moment and suddenly realise that Antares had an invisibility cloak *in his pocket*, and act accordingly. Even after Snape made a thankfully short appearance, Antares couldn't calm down – and supposed he wouldn't until he got to Hogwarts and enclosed himself in one of those abandoned dungeons no one went into so he could finally enlarge those books he'd bought and *do* something about his mind being like a frigging open book to anyone who knew Legilimency –

"Antares? What is *wrong* with you?" Antares started, looking up at Charles, who now had a bemused smile on his face. "I just told you your arse was a teapot, and you said yes..."

Antares blushed, and immediately set about listening to Charles' enthusiastic description of the series of balls he'd attended over Christmas. Adrian scowled at him, but it didn't make any difference – he wasn't Snape, after all, and couldn't see that Antares thought him quite silly for holding a grudge over something he'd done to Antares, so...

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By the time Antares had finally dredged up the courage to set out for an abandoned dungeon to safely brood over his cloak (it was his now, he didn't care what that bloody note had said) and the books on Occlumency, it was far past his bedtime and a ripe time for being caught (*and searched, don't forget that*) by Filch or, even worse, by Snape, so instead of carefully unshrinking the books that he'd carried

on him for so long in a cold, silent dungeon well away from Slytherin proper, he found himself doing so in his own bed in his dormitory, behind clumsily spelled drapes, his cloak well hidden and very much out of sight in case someone came in.

It was paranoid, but still – with him, an invisibility cloak would attract so much attention if found that it didn't bear thinking about.

*“Engorgio maxima,”* Antares whispered, gently tapping the first small square as he focused on the book returning to normal size, as it had said in the instructional note Tracey had wangled from the clerk. The book swelled slowly to full size and stopped with a slight pop, looking nicely unharmed, and he decided to thumb through it first to see if he and his friends had made the right decision in putting up the money for it. Its cover was still as dusty as ever, making him sneeze as silently as he could, but the text within it was unchanged.

*The Artes Wich Neede No Sichte*, written in cramped, medieval script, sent a shiver through him like it had in the shop, and Antares found himself turning the pages slowly, in deference to the faint, almost heavy sort of crackle they made as he handled them. The heading *An Protection Muche Esteemed* caught his eye just as much as the strange comments about the *Artes Communicable* and the *Artes Clean*, and Antares found himself absorbed in the strange, dry narrative about the Blind Arts as a whole almost before he decided to read it through. The strange names of the other Arts were mostly incomprehensible, but the descriptions, particularly of Conturomency and Eradomency, struck a chord – they sounded like Medieval forms of what Obliviators did nowadays, and it excited him strangely to hear of such a mundane job being one of the Blind Arts.

Antares turned another page, his hand shaking slightly as he digested that thought. Why, it meant he could learn Occlumency, for if the Ministry, inept as they were, taught their employees some form of the Blind Arts, it meant he, Antares, could probably learn Occlumency with no trouble, if he just put in the effort.

Antares smiled, and, being barely able to focus on the dry text after that as thoughts of freedom and being able to have *five* Invisibility Cloaks if he wanted and meet Quirrel every morning and afternoon

without Snape's knowledge danced through his mind. Feeling smugly satisfied with himself, he closed and gently re-shrunk the book, turning his attention to the other one.

It was by the same author, and had come strangely cheap in comparison with the other, bigger book (according to Tracey), which, to Antares, either meant it was worse, or that it had less information.

He was wrong. In the book was a wealth of pages, more than it looked like it contained, and all on or about some particular technique or part of Occlumency. He read this one late into the night, feeling more and more confused and daunted as he went on encountering meaningless terms like *associations* and *whatnot*. He closed it after a while, feeling drained but yet determined to puzzle out what it was about, and, after shrinking it and hiding it along with its partner, was soon adrift in an uneasy dream where Snape hammered open his skull and drew out the Cloak in shimmering, blood-soaked folds.

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The next day started off in a strangely normal way, with a sleepy breakfast with Adrian and Charles and the rest of the students that had stayed behind for Christmas. Antares was more than surprised to see Hermione Granger alone at the Gryffindor table – not that it was surprising that she was alone, bossy and overbearing as she was, but that she hadn't thought to escape the probably hostile air of her house and go home for the two weeks of the holiday. It intrigued him so much that he found himself actually sending a sarcastic hello her way when he passed the Gryffindor table on his way out, but not enough to deter him from returning to his dorm to continue his perusal of the Occlumency books in broad daylight. After a little deliberation, Antares decided to smuggle the books (and The Cloak, because he couldn't bear to leave it unwatched in his dorm) into the library with him along with others, and to try to sit in one of the corners no one went to so that he wouldn't be disturbed. All in all, a good plan.

Unfortunately, he hadn't counted on the sheer nerve and irritativeness of Granger, of all people.

“Erm – Black? Antares?” Antares started horribly, knocking *The Arte of Shielding* off his table and thereby losing his page as Granger’s horrid frizzy hair loomed over his left shoulder. “Oh, sorry –”

“What do you want?” Antares snapped, cutting her off both verbally and physically, making sure to slide his Charms notebook over the other Occlumency book before stooping to snatch up *The Arte*. Granger bit her lip as she watched him do it, making him roll her eyes even as a weird sort of guilt shot through him. “Sit down, for goodness’ sake – it’s bloody irritating when people hover like that.”

“People shouldn’t swear,” she pointed out uncertainly, but she did sit down. Antares cleared his throat and opened his Charms notebook, trying to think of why on earth he’d asked her to sit down in the first place. “That wasn’t what you were reading –”

“Well, that’s just too bad, isn’t it?” Antares said flatly, giving her a cold look. “What do you want, Granger?”

“I – I wanted to ask – Neville and Ron, they’re always talking about some person,” Granger said, lowly, looking shifty as all hell. Antares fought the urge to roll his eyes – just before the holiday had begun, he’d seen how she’d started talking to them in Potions and other classes, all shy and nervous. He just bet – “Some person called Nicholas Flamel, I don’t know if –”

“If I know anything? We *are* sitting in a library, Granger, and you do happen to have working eyes, arms and legs. Find Flamel yourself.”

“But we’ve been looking all Christmas, and –”

“Oh, it’s *we*, is it?” Antares snapped his book shut and stood abruptly, fed up. “I’m not some kind of bloody almanac. If Golden Boy and his lackey want research done, they can do it themselves.”

“But you’re –”

Antares almost groaned. “An Apprentice. Not an almanac, Granger! Morgana – tell them to ask a bloody teacher –”

“But we *can’t*,” Granger hissed, dogging him determinedly as he began to gather up his things. “You know something, don’t you?”

“What?” Antares sped up, avoiding a pair of glowering Ravenclaws as he started to head for the doors. He’d take his chances in the dorm if he had to, to avoid being bothered like this –

“You didn’t say you didn’t know who he was,” Granger snapped, pausing Antares in his tracks.

“Really?” He gave her an appraising glance – he’d been about to try saying that, to get her off his case. Interesting that she would notice, but irritating, just the same. There were far more important things he could be doing than this.

“So? Nicholas Flamel?” He’d reached the library doors without mishap by now, and she was *still* following him, an irritatingly determined look on her face.

Antares, giving up, gave her a hard look. “How important is it to you?”

Granger sighed, but looked oddly relieved. “Really important.”

Antares did roll his eyes, then. “Spell it out for me.” Thank god there was no one in the hallway just outside the library – despite the fact that he was an Apprentice, and was supposed to talk to everyone and anyone who needed help, he’d get so ribbed for talking to Granger if anyone saw him – “And be quick, for Morgana’s sake. I’ve got something a lot more important to do than listening to you –”

“I’ll help,” Granger said, suddenly. “I’ll – er – volunteer. In – erm, Potions –”

“You’re not allowed to do that,” Antares said, a little shocked. “And Snape would laugh you out of the classroom –”

“What I mean is, if you need help with something, I’ll help,” Granger insisted, not seeming to hear him. “It’s that important.”

Antares boggled at her for a moment. *No one* would willingly risk courting ridicule from Snape, not even him – the fact that she’d even

offer, falsely or not, said quite a lot about how determined she was. And, possibly, how foolish – what if he'd been the kind of person to take her up on her offer, just to see her ensuing humiliation? He knew how the Gryffindors – and, for that matter, how everyone else saw Slytherins as the Enemy. The Ones that were Out to Get You. And here was Granger, likely thinking the same thing in the back of her mind, and still offering.

Mind-boggling, exactly. “Is it, then? Nicholas Flamel, eh? Well, he invented the Philosopher’s Stone – you probably know what that is – and Dumbledore worked with him once, or something. *Tempus* – right, lunchtime. I’ll just be –”

“Wait! Black – you didn’t tell me what you wanted!”

Rolling his eyes again, Antares gave Granger a look over his shoulder. “I’ll tell you when I think of something, for crying out loud. Go study, or something.” Ignoring the indignant noises she was making, Antares started off for the Great Hall at a proper speed, sighing to himself. It wasn’t his fault the little idiot didn’t know not to give open-ended promises to anyone – better she learnt it from him, at any rate.

*And besides*, Antares mused, as he turned the corner, *if anyone can ask questions without making teachers suspicious, it’s definitely her*. From the sheer amount of strange practices and spells referenced in *The Arte of Shielding*, Granger probably wouldn’t have to stew that long – there were certain things Antares knew instinctively that he, Tracey and Blaise couldn’t ask without attracting attention.

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Lunch took rather a longer time to get to and through, as Antares made the mistake of tentatively asking Professor Flitwick about charms or spells that could limit noise. After a long lecture on the ethics of silencing charms (the spell family for limiting noise, as far as Antares had been able to understand) and the difficulties of using such charms in real-life situations, because of how easy Flitwick said it was to train oneself to notice simple sounds that aren’t there, Antares was more than ready to beg off the subject and forget about somehow soundproofing the discussions he knew he’d want to have

with Blaise and Tracey about Occlumency. For that was what he'd decided – if he knew those two at all, they'd want to share in whatever mischief he got up to with the Cloak. And it would be simple enough for Snape to read *their* minds if he was suspicious of Antares' goings on, and couldn't read Antares' own mind, hence Antares planning to suggest to his friends that they learn along with him if they wanted to be a part of the activities to do with the Cloak.

Somehow, Antares even managed to get free of the obviously bored Adrian and Charles, who he could tell were itching to start some trouble, by pretending to be tired and sullen about school starting, and anxious about a (fake) Potions assignment that was due within the week. Having decided against returning to the library for Granger-related reasons, Antares had tried remaining in the dorm so he could really try out the Invisibility Cloak without the threat of discovery hanging over his head. Only Adrian kept barging in and asking stupid questions and trying to get him to come out and break the rules by doing some flying (first years weren't strictly allowed to, outside of flying lessons – the only reason they let him anywhere near a broom during Quidditch practices was because there was some provision for first years on Quidditch teams), which, as tempted as Antares was to try, was a phenomenally bad idea what with the teachers bustling around preparing for the Feast and for classes tomorrow and so on.

After having to pretend to have been inside the shower room for the second time, Antares gave up, stuffed the Cloak as gently as possible into a pocket, and resolved to *find* somewhere in the dungeons where he wouldn't be disturbed, or where he'd at least have some warning if he was going to be. Slipping out of the common room with a glum look and a Potions book concealing *The Arte of Shielding* under his arm, he finally found himself wandering in the dungeons, completely alone.

And, therefore, ready to sit down and really try to understand what was in the book. It took a while and a lot of jumping at drips and strange sounds before he found a smallish dungeon room, one that unlocked with *Alohomora* that had a few desks and chairs and boasted even a tiny, grimy window that looked out – or, rather, into the lake. Antares, pouring more effort into brightening his lit wand, watched strange-looking creatures go past the thick window for a

minute or two, wobbling on top of the sturdiest desk in the classroom, which he'd needed to see out (or was it into, or under?) properly.

Then he could no longer put it off. Drawing out the Cloak, he began to practise walking around, as quietly as he could. It took a while and quite a lot of patience before he could minimise the sound of his footsteps, and took even longer for him to walk quickly with it covering every inch of him (the Cloak always felt like it was slipping off his shoulders, which slowed him down a lot), but by the time he finally took the magnificent silver fabric off, Antares felt like he was ready to try something sneaky tonight, when Blaise and Tracey finally got here with the others – well after the Feast and everything.

That was until he looked at the Potions book and the shabby book it was resting on top of, and remembered why he'd come out here in the first place. Cursing himself, Antares folded away the Cloak and tucked it as deep into his robe pockets as it would go, then sat down to have another go at the Occlumency book.

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It wasn't until well into the dinner hour that Antares, completely absorbed in the oddly easy examples and exercises in *The Arte*, thought to finally cast a quick *Tempus* for the time. Eyes widening, he shut the book and shot out of the rickety chair he'd been sitting in – if the Express had been on time, the Feast had probably been going on for about ten or fifteen minutes. Sweating with fear – because, how much more suspicious could a person *look*, absenting themselves from the Great Hall when everyone was already there – he locked the dungeon room with a hasty *offirmo* that he well knew might not take and retraced his steps as best as he could to Slytherin, then dropped off his books in the empty dorm before racing out and heading for the Great Hall. By the time Antares got there, it was already nearly full with people fresh off the Express, and most of the teachers were at the high table, conversing loudly. The Slytherin table was almost full, and –

“Antares! Where've you *been*?” – Tracey was there, looking almost frighteningly excited. Daphne and Pansy, who were conversing in low tones beside her, both gave her highly irritated looks that only made



Antares grin slightly – she could be so infuriating when excited – “I think Blaise went to the toilet for a bit or something, but anyway –”

“I hear you, Tracey, but could you keep it down a bit? Snape’s probably glaring at us...”

The transformation that simple, unthinking statement caused was just as frightening as the excitement that had preceded the dismay on Tracey’s face. Antares swore, reaching out and latching onto Tracey’s twitching hand as he slid awkwardly into his seat. “Christ, Tracey, calm down, I was just saying that –”

“Look who’s finally here,” Blaise said darkly, from behind Antares, suddenly enough that it made him jump. “Oh, calm down, Tracey, Snape’s not even here yet.” And, to Antares’ surprise, Blaise was right – Snape was nowhere to be seen at the high table. It made him feel that much better about being so conspicuously late, as the bastard, if told by anyone, was more likely to equate Antares with the other students that were still filing in through the double doors – late for some trivial reason or the other, and therefore not suspicious in the least. Tracey glared at them both, but Blaise took no notice, sliding diffidently into place beside Antares as he sat down. “She’s been like this the whole way here, honestly –”

“Oh, fuck you, Blaise,” Tracey muttered vehemently. “You’ve been just as paranoid as I have – what about when you wouldn’t leave the compartment because someone said Snape was on the train?”

“There’s no point in going on like this,” Antares began to say, hastily, as Daphne and Pansy were starting to stare at them, but he was too late.

“Are you three in trouble, then?” Daphne asked, suspiciously. “Because –”

“The only trouble we’re in is of starving,” Antares said, his cheeks heating with embarrassment at making such a stupid joke. “These two are just being paranoid, that’s all –”

“You better be,” Pansy said, a little nastily. “I just heard from Marcombe that one of the seventh years got docked big time for

being caught sneaking somewhere – we're almost forty bloody points down, now, and anything that adds to that..."

"Don't be so paranoid, Pansy," Blaise said, recovering from his initial panic at partial discovery. "We were just thinking about the Potions homework due on –"

Antares gasped. "Wait a minute, there *is* something due?" After a confused-looking nod in reply, he scowled at his plate. And everything had been going so well...

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"What do you mean, we can't see it now?" Tracey hissed, her face reddening with indignation. "Antares, you *promised!*"

Antares looked up from the horribly messy corner table he was trying to work at in the common room, scowling thoroughly in her direction. "And when I 'promised', I obviously didn't know there was a bloody great piece of shitty homework due, did I?"

"Antares –"

He rolled his eyes, jabbing his quill into the nearest inkpot with an angry jerk of his fingers. "Look, do you want me to get caught?" Blaise sighed loudly, but Antares ignored him, ploughing on despite Tracey's increasingly darkening expression. "Do you want us to get caught, Tracey?"

"Of course I bloody don't!" she snapped, a little louder than was necessary, and Antares scowled at her again as he bent down over the roll of parchment spread out before him, slashing words carelessly onto it. He'd spent the entire Feast worrying about this, and what did he get? Irritation. Anger. When all he was trying to do was to finish the cursed assignment as soon and as well as possible, so that Snape had no beef (well, no more than usual) with him the next day. Antares, after reading through many descriptions of preliminary tests and experiments in *The Arte*, had no illusions of how well he could do against Snape if the man really wanted to know what was going on.

And yet, Tracey was still glaring at him, shoulders stiff. Antares sighed, angrily, and made his answer in as low and calm a tone as he could manage. "The way to doing that is not being suspicious, you idiot! If we don't do anything suspicious or different, he won't notice us, and –"

"Are you three planning something against the rules?" Antares, Blaise and Tracey all looked up at the angry tone, Antares trying not to jump even as he recognised the voice as belonging to Marcus Flint, who gave them no time to answer. "Because if you get into trouble and lose points – correction, Black, if *you* get into trouble, your punishment better not keep you off the Quidditch team. Important things will be taught in the next practice, understand? If you don't learn them, you might as well stop fucking coming – you hear me?" Antares nodded hastily, not needing to look at Tracey and Blaise to see that they were doing the same. Flint smiled nastily, then wandered away, leaving behind a pregnant silence.

A silence that itched dreadfully, in Antares' opinion – an uncomfortable one. He broke it. "Don't be too worried, he's always like that –"

"What, threatening to take away the only chance at popularity – no, scratch that, at being *normal*, that you'll likely ever have?" Antares gave Blaise a hard look, and saw, to his surprise, that his friend's tone and expression were serious.

"Blaise, Flint's a fucking tyrant," Antares said slowly, inking his quill again. "Of course he does."

Tracey stirred, now seemingly no longer angry with Antares, but with someone else. "But that's –"

"Is it because of Snape?" Blaise asked, talking over Tracey with that intense look on his face – his Puzzle-Solving one. Antares tried to write out a sentence as he tried to think of an answer.

A minute later, he put down his quill, finally fed up. "Do you understand *now* why I have to finish this?" he demanded, eyes flicking from Blaise to Tracey and back. "Flint would never pull me out, because I'm supposedly too good a flyer to let go, and everyone

would question his sanity if he did so. But Snape...see anyone questioning his sanity lately? To his face?"

Blaise looked down at his feet, and Tracey sighed, shifting uncomfortably. Antares picked up his quill again, toying with the limp parts of the feather as he echoed Tracey's sigh. "This is for high stakes, all right? I don't know how you missed that before now, but that's got to fucking stop. If you can't be patient, or can't help me keep be patient about all this, then..."

"What about if Snape looks us up?" Tracey suddenly said, her tone low and frightened. "I mean, I'd do that, if I suspected anything, and I couldn't get through to you –"

"Which is why we should all learn it," Antares said, elbowing her as calmly as possible. Tracey's eyes went wide, and Blaise straightened out of his slouch opposite them on the chair. "We could practice on each other, couldn't we? It'd be easier all doing it together, too."

"That makes sense," Blaise allowed, fidgeting nervously, his eyes scanning the common room, which was now starting to empty. It was a minute or two before he piped up again. "But wouldn't that mean learning the opposite?" He gave Antares a meaningful look as he continued, in a low whisper. "You know, Legiliwhatsy?"

"Probably," Antares admitted, "but I'd feel a lot more comfy having you two rooting around than anyone else. As long as we promise to stay out of certain areas –"

Tracey frowned, looking confused. "Certain areas? There are areas?"

"Yeah...well, sort of. You'll understand, when you read it." Antares gave them both meaningful looks. "When both of you read it, yeah. Maybe not tonight, but still."

"Still, yeah," Blaise said, Tracey mumbling a sort of echo while she stared into space, no doubt off in Occlumency- and Legilimency-related spy adventures. Or something. Antares merely shook his head, smiling softly for the first time since dinner, and went back to trying to finish his assignment.

Surprisingly, it took a long time for either of his friends to realise that they hadn't decided anything about the Invisibility Cloak. The common room had nearly emptied, and Antares was just doing a final scan of his messy but serviceable roll of parchment while Blaise and Tracey played a near-silent game of Exploding Snap, Tracey having gone off to fetch a pack of cards. And, true to form, it was Blaise that first brought it up.

"Antares?"

"Mmm?"

"The Cloak," Blaise said, his tone deliberate. He was still looking through a mildly smoking hand, his attention more centred on Antares than on the cards Tracey was tidily switching while Blaise gave Antares a hard look.

Despite his weariness and irritation at a sentence that didn't seem to read right, Antares smiled. "I was wondering when someone was going to ask that."

Blaise snorted quietly, but didn't look away. "Wondering as in wondering how to fob us off, or wondering as in how to include us in its ownership?"

"Remember, Antares, I bought you the books," Tracey interjected, sounding relatively unperturbed in comparison to Blaise. "And Blaise got us refreshments, too – thirsty work, that shopping –"

"Shelve it, you two," Antares said, sighing. "It's still mine; I'll do what I want with it."

Blaise put down his cards, looking a little angry for the first time. "But you'll share what you're doing, because our actions –"

"Calm down, I didn't say I wouldn't share it with you," Antares said, cutting him off. "All I'm saying is it *is* mine – I'd rather give up a leg than give it away, right now. The sheer possibilities of that thing –"

"I knew it," Tracey breathed, putting down her own cards. "You tried it out, didn't you? At home, or...?"

“At – at home, yeah,” Antares said, stumbling over the word ‘home’ as he suddenly realised Bella might be starting to think of it that way, just as he was, “and here, too, in some dungeon. I’ll show you.”

“So you’ll let both of us use it?” Blaise said, his tone a lot more belligerent than the hopeful expression on his face implied. “Really, truly let us use it?”

“Of course,” Antares said, trying not to grin at the way Blaise’s eyes widened like saucers. “Then again, if I hear you telling anyone else –”

“Don’t be stupid,” Tracey said, rolling her eyes, but Antares ignored her.

“Tell anyone else, and I swear I’ll Obliviate the two of you. And them.” Blaise snorted, but Antares purposely kept his expression serious, as if he was telling the truth. “You think it’s only Occlumency in those books? It’s all to do with the mind, so it’s bloody well related, I think. And anyway, if I really wanted to, I could.”

Blaise and Tracey exchanged a slightly disbelieving look, but it was Tracey that spoke eventually. “You’re a first year, Antares – Ministry Obliviators are a lot older and a lot more experienced than first years, you know that.”

“And we supposedly study the will and the word,” Antares shot back calmly, parroting what Bella had always told him. “There’s a word for memory charms, and if either of you turned me in or blabbed to someone, you can be sure there would be the will.” At the unreadable look his friends exchanged, Antares bent back over his work. “I’m just saying, that’s all – there’s a lot I’d be willing to do to keep that Cloak. Nothing particularly new, I should think.”

“Nothing particularly new?” Blaise said, sounding a little too pleased to be as cowed as Antares had been expecting. “I think you just threatened us properly for the first time, you ninny.”

“Excuse me?”

“Blaise is right, Antares,” Tracey said, a rather smug look coming over her face. “Honestly, we were starting to wonder whether Slytherin would be right for you.”

Antares tried not to splutter, but his indignant answer was not far off from one. “Tracey, my mum’s family was traditionally Slytherin for years, all right? *She* was a Slytherin, and she raised me as one –”

“It’s nothing personal,” Blaise amended, sounding a little amused. “It’s just that you’ve never seemed very – well – Slytherin, not until you threatened us with Obliviation –”

“I mean, I’m sorry, but the name thing was a bit of a joke,” Tracey said, her tone apologetic.

Antares scowled. “And do you hear anyone calling me nicknames all over the place?” Tracey blushed a little and averted her eyes, and Antares wished strongly that he could already cast some rudimentary form of the mind-reading spell just so that he could see who –

“Antares, you’re overreacting,” Blaise said, sounding patient as he began to collect the cards, which were all starting to vibrate a little angrily on the table between him and Tracey. “It’s not so much the fact that your threats aren’t quite up to standard, okay? It’s more the way you don’t seem to think about something before you try it. Come on, if I was as blindly heroic as you, you’d be thinking the same thing.”

“I’ve half a bloody mind to Obliviate both of you right now,” Antares said coolly, rolling up his parchment with angry, nervous movements. “Blindly heroic, my *arse* –”

“Blaise didn’t mean that,” Tracey said firmly, giving the slightly taken-aback Blaise a hard look. “*Did you*, Blaise?”

“Antares, I –”

“If I’d been one to think before *trying*,” Antares said through gritted teeth, rising angrily from his seat, “your brains would still be splattered all over that shop front in Knockturn Alley. Don’t try to

fucking tell me about thinking before trying, Blaise – if you'd *thought*, you wouldn't have been there in the first place –"

"It's not my fault that I didn't know enough about Knockturn!" Blaise said, standing up a little jerkily, his expression starting to become rather irritated. "If I'd known –"

"Blaise, shut *up*," Tracey hissed, shoving at his side as she stood up as well. Antares gave both of them a cold look as he began to gather up his inkpot and various textbooks, an awful, tight feeling taking hold of his chest. His own *friends* – "Antares, please, you know how this idiot is –"

"I also know," Antares hissed, "how my threats aren't up to fucking standard, and how people call me names behind my back – names that you hear, and won't tell me. You tell anyone about the Cloak, and Obliviation'll be the least of your worries, understand? Good bloody night." He stormed off, ignoring Blaise's indignant comments and Tracey's slightly panicked tone as she called an apology after him. Barging into his dorm, Antares headed straight for his bed, ignoring Draco's whining about noisy peasants in favour of stuffing away his belongings as fast as he could and dragging out the shrunk copy of *The Arte* and climbing haphazardly into his bed and dragging the curtains closed. Hearing the door open again, Antares gritted his teeth, willing the stinging pain of the Stinging Hex into the curtains around him as he whispered the hex, directing it at them and just hoping Blaise would try to poke his fat head in and be stung until he cried.

It felt like a jolt, seeing the thin stream of magic hit the curtains directly in front of him and fizzle into them with an ominous crackle, and Antares' mouth dropped open in surprise. He'd only been half-expecting it to work, in truth, and suspected, as he leaned forward to tentatively touch his still normal-looking curtains, that more anger than sense had gone into thinking of doing this –

"Ow," he whispered, jerking back his stung hand. Bewilderment washed over him, mingling with his anger and shame at having his friends – his own *friends*, telling him he didn't belong here. Telling him, essentially, that he was too soft, too weak, too heroic for Slytherin.



Antares scowled, poking the dusty book hard with his wand without thinking anything in particular.

He didn't understand what he'd just done. But, then again, he'd never felt like this, felt so tremulously alive and scared and angry and shamed all at the same time, never wanted so much to prove himself to these people, to all the people that gave him sly looks in the corridors and muttered that he was just a stupid halfblood swot, that thought he wouldn't amount to anything.

"I'll show them," Antares muttered fiercely, barely seeing the words as he split open *The Arte* with rough, careless movements, flipping through to the first page of the small section on Legilimency.

And, by Morgana, he would.

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*A/N: So then. The spoiler competition, of course, is truly over now, eh? But still – how'd you like it? I feel pretty clever for coming up with the go-around of Occlumency (canon, no less) to ward off certain plot holes in the future. Hope the chapter was fun for you – it was fun for me, especially the last bit.*

*Next chapter is from Severus' POV, and is going to be fun, fun, fun, because Severus + Antares' various situations delicious conflict. Oh yeah – I can see it already...*

## **Chapter 17: Odd Feelings**

Mornings had never been Severus' forte. Even with the promise of Bella's soft, warm skin and openly lascivious embrace, he always found it hard to peel off the blanket and stumble out of the comforting warmth of his bed. He lived in fear of Bella deciding his morning grumbles weren't worth staying in bed for, of course, just as he lived in fear of Bella deciding some things – well, many things about him weren't worth staying for, period.

This morning, Bella was very far away, and though Severus could practically feel his clock glowering down at him with strictest disapproval ticking through its antique wooden shell, he felt quite inclined to wrap himself more firmly in the blankets that now surrounded him. It had been like this for the past few days after returning to the school – this irritating, wrenching feeling of cool space where there should be none. Severus pulled his blankets in around himself, scowling at nothing, vowing, as he'd done for the past week, to have an extra half hour of warmth, to compensate himself for the warmth he couldn't currently have.

That was, until he remembered. Groaning, Severus turned over, beating savagely at his pillow. *Gryffindor/Hufflepuff, at nine – what absolute fucking joy to have to see students so early in the morning –*

Somehow, oddly, his irritation translated to tension, and tension translated into something entirely different. Something that would have been very, very welcome if Bella had currently not been languishing off in his home. Something that certainly wasn't very – welcome – now...fine, he was lying to himself.

Grimacing, Severus kicked groggily at the covers, feeling a flush run up his neck and chest as one of his hands went wandering to – er – deal with things.

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The first lesson of the day was oddly disorientating. Perhaps it was the sheer fidgety nature of his foolish students, so early in the new term. Perhaps it was the way the windows seemed to close in on him, on them. Perhaps it was the bath lotion he'd stolen from Bella, the

light, green smell that he couldn't help inadvertently trying to sniff every once in a while, without his stupid students notice.

In either case, thirty minutes into the double lesson, Severus was raring to be out. He paced the classroom more violently than usual, deducting more points than usual, snarling more than usual –

It was ridiculous, this feeling. Why on earth was he having it *now*, after those two interesting (wonderful) weeks soaked in quiet, passionate sex – sex with no little boy prematurely coming to understand why Mummy did that to Snape in the mornings...? Severus shook his head angrily, turning on a foolish-looking Gryffindor clearly about to stir her potion in the wrong direction for the third fucking time this lesson –

“Bell! You *imbecile*! Stop stirring before you kill us all!”

Now, ordinarily, that statement, delivered in the requisite scathing tone, would have stopped the little bint in her tracks. This time, however, it only made her stir faster, and quite suddenly stop stirring entirely, because her cauldron had disappeared. The whole class stopped stirring as one, shock coursing through every one of their puny little minds, but Severus' fevered, angry mind, most of all.

“Get out,” he ordered, suddenly able to understand what on earth he'd done. And, as they all fled, even the abominable little Weasley shits didn't look back or dare to hang around, and despite the alarming thought of permanently wandlessly Vanishing a student's cauldron for the first time in three years, Severus could not but feel grateful that he was feared.

He sighed, walking over to his already messy desk and sinking into his chair. He could already tell it would be a long day, today.

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Unfortunately, this was one of those days when Severus' somewhat pessimistic intuition was quite right. The sixth year Slytherin/Ravenclaw lesson that followed the disastrously abrupt Gryffindor/Hufflepuff one was just as awful in terms of student skill and the vague feelings of claustrophobia that kept trickling up and down Severus' spine while he strode around his classroom trying to

keep order. By the time Severus finally dismissed them, he was more than ready for a glass of the brandy he kept hidden in his office for the worse days, and even more than ready to entertain the idea of registering for one of the deadly dull Potions conferences that were starting to pop up at this time of year, simply for the chance to leave Hogwarts and spend some time with Bella without generating more than the usual amount of suspicion.

Yes. Severus grimaced as he knocked back the last of the brandy, charming his breath fresh to hide the evidence of his inability to cope with his inauspicious return to teacherhood. And, of course, his separation from Bella. It was quite depressing to think back to how she generally tried to Floo home for lunch even on her busiest days in the shop, and even more depressing to think of the quiet evenings he'd spent edging his arm around her as inconspicuously as possible while Antares dozed or chattered away in front of the fire. Severus rubbed jerkily at his itchy nose and wondered how on earth it had come to that – longing for a place or person in this manner had never really been his style, even during the days of his various pathetic crushes on several girls in Hogwarts and beyond.

Well. There certainly wasn't much he could do, right now. Severus straightened abruptly from his slumped position leaning against the large desk in his office. Lunch, as one of the bolder elves had informed him today after he'd given in to his severe antipathy for even the thought of going to breakfast and being twinkled and stared at by all and sundry, was supposed to be some sort of warm, meaty pie. He liked those. His mood would improve a little, perhaps, once he had some warm food in him.

And he'd certainly stop itching to write a letter of registration to those fools organising this year's Concoction Convene.

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Fifteen minutes later, Severus was busy extracting a somewhat crumpled piece of parchment and a Self-Inking quill, and trying to look like he scribbled hasty letters at lunch every day. As soon as he'd walked into the still relatively empty Great Hall and taken one look at Albus' forcedly jovial expression, Severus had given up and given in. This weekend was not one to be at Hogwarts and within

easy reach of the Headmaster and whatever mood he was hiding under his ubiquitous beard – he could sense it.

Which was why Severus continued scribbling even when Albus turned in his direction and asked after his health a little too loudly.

“Fine, Headmaster,” Severus said, his tone of voice purposely absent as he put the final touches to his deplorably messy letter. “Perhaps a little tired from some experimentation over the holiday, but...”

“Experimentation, Severus?” Albus’ eyes sharpened with that dreaded curiosity, and Severus immediately realised that he’d been too absent, or been too forthcoming, and thus – “Oh, do come closer, my dear boy, and tell me all about them.”

“Well,” Severus said, a little desperately, “I’ve just remembered that I need to post this –”

“Oh, but no matter! If you’ll but give it to me, I’ll see that Fawkes takes it. He’s been awfully restless this Christmas, you know – do him good to get out.” And, without further ado, the letter was gently prised from Severus’ hands as he reluctantly advanced to sit beside Albus, who, to his further horror, actually unfolded it and read it, making no pretence of asking Severus for permission. “The Concoction Convene, Severus? I didn’t know you still subscribed to their newsletter.”

Severus shrugged, helping himself to a slightly larger slice of pie than he normally would have allowed himself. These were special circumstances, if any – for goodness’ sake, Severus had the strong feeling that he was in for an inquisition. A veritable grilling for gossip, done Albus-style.

“Well, then, I suppose you’ll require leave for this weekend,” Albus said grudgingly, refolding the letter with a gentle tap of his fingers. “Although it is rather late to be signing up with those awful people – aren’t they as likely to refuse to honour your registration at this late hour?”

“Oh, I should think not,” Severus said, now attacking his pie with a little more vigour than was probably necessary. One of the editors of *Concoct It*, the newsletter associated with the Convene, owed him for

a rather nasty little vengeance potion – one of the older kind – that he'd requested some two years ago. It was part of the reason why he still 'subscribed' to the newsletter; that is, got it for free. Armundo was smart enough to know that Severus hadn't brewed the Designation Draught (such an innocent name for a potion that slowly dissected one's organs with every further betrayal of the designee) merely for the practice, as he'd intimated. Severus had never been one to pass up a chance to set another soul hell-bent on revenge on the right path – or, indeed, to pass up such an easy chance for blackmail.

"Well," Albus said, sighing a little as he returned (*partially. Goodness knows what's in his stupid old head to ask me now*) his attention to his own plate, "then you are planning to leave, say, Friday evening?"

"Afternoon," Severus insisted, trying not to sound strident, desperate, or insistent. As Albus knew very well, he had some of Friday afternoon free after a pesky third year Slytherin/Ravenclaw class. Severus, on his regular jaunts before Christmas, had taken care to leave well after supper so as not to incite suspicion. But it would be even more suspicious this time around if he did not insist on leaving as early as possible – the Convene, if he remembered rightly, was situated somewhere in Russia this year, and Portkeying or Apparating there was always a Herculean task that would strip precious time from the hours of (mediocre) talks, speeches and discussions. "I assume you are not going, yourself?"

"No," said, sighing lowly with just the inflection, which meant...*he's depressed?*

Severus blinked, and did not hear the further, irrelevant explanation the Headmaster went on to make. He'd know this old fool for long enough that he could easily recognise the signs of many of his common moods, one of which, funnily enough, was depression. Severus nodded to something Albus said that sounded like a question, and tried to make himself eat instead of thinking of the possible cause of his old friend's depression. If he knew Albus at all –

"...but I'm afraid I need you, this weekend," Albus was now saying, slowly, "Well, this week, at any rate. I performed an old ownership ritual during the holiday, and got very...unusual results." Severus

dropped his fork. Merlin, not this obsession with Potter's trappings *again* – "The item I used for the ritual did not return, Severus."

At that, Severus could not help choking on his mouthful of pie. After an embarrassingly solicitous series of questions about his health, Albus went on, his tone a lot brighter than this awful subject warranted.

"Usually, in the past, when I performed the ritual, something always went wrong. One of the first owls I used went mad for a week – terribly distressing – and usually, the owls I used would simply return at dawn." Severus nodded slightly, dimly recognising what might have been the problem even now, when the remembrance of the first strange ritual Albus had had him brew a horribly complex Finding Philtre for had long faded from his mind. "This Christmas, I felt a draw, like once before, and I used the remnants of the Philtre you brewed for me – what, five years ago? I simply cannot remember, now – and tried to finish the ritual as usual. But –"

"You didn't?" Severus said, interrupting more out of impatience and a need to see his own blasted letter sent off sooner rather than later than out of any real supposition. But Albus nodded, slowly, and Severus felt his eyes widen – Albus, to his knowledge, had never left a ritual unfinished. And, in the case of that one –

"I believe I dosed off," Albus said carefully, paying more attention to the colourful mound of vegetables on his plate than to Severus' even more surprised expression.

"Dosed off," Severus repeated, unable to help himself. Albus Dumbledore for 'I blacked out and woke up with a killer headache', if he remembered correctly. Severus gave up any attempt at eating, then, laying his cutlery down with as controlled an expression as he possessed. *Dosed off*, indeed – Severus remembered inventing that, partly as a joke, as code for the times when he'd been too exhausted after another meeting with the enemy. And now – Albus used it. *Albus*.

Dosed off. What kind of ritual magic could accomplish such a thing? And, even more unbelievably, do so with Albus *Dumbledore*, of all people?

“Just so, Severus,” Albus said, nodding again, avoiding Severus’ now rather panicked eye. “Be that as it may, I do remember the stage of the ritual at which my weakness overcame me – the letter.”

The *letter*? The letter, in that ritual, was possibly the least significant part of the entire thing. The point, in fact, at which past spell casters had chosen to suborn it, to deceive the old magic that underpinned it for their own gain. Severus closed his eyes, mind already racing, already drawing together past and present, already retrieving memories of similar rituals suborned, subverted, hideously misused. There could only be one answer, and it made bile rise in Severus’ throat. “Headmaster, you cannot possibly think that –”

“Of course I do, Severus,” Albus said, his tone sharpening a little for the first time in the conversation. “I would be a fool not to, as would you.”

“If your theories are correct, then that *item* would be supremely useless to him,” Severus insisted lowly, his voice tight with anger. With fear. In reality, he would rather think that the Dark Lord no longer existed than to suppose that he might not be as resourceful as he’d ever been in past times.

“I will need your help, Severus – I intend to try to perform it again. Perhaps to trace it to its source –”

“No.” Severus did not bother looking up, then. This was the Headmaster at his most foolhardy – his most persuasive. To agree to such folly – good god, if the Dark Lord was behind this, it would be the very purpose of the whole thing to draw Albus out – “Use your sense, old man. If *he* subverted the ritual –”

“There are ways of ascertaining that, Severus,” Albus said patiently, as if he’d not heard Severus’ flat refusal. “There is a potion –”

“Until I see the ingredients and method with my own eyes, you are on your own, Headmaster,” Severus said, rising swiftly. To stay here would mean listening further, would mean (*Merlin forbid*) being convinced. “If the potion you speak of involves blood or connecting strands of *any* sort, I will bid you a good weekend and be off on Friday afternoon. Am I understood?”



Albus sighed, nodding with only the slightest sign of reluctance. Which meant Severus would likely have to vet fifteen potions and their variations himself to suit the old bastard's purposes. Severus, leaning gracefully over his mentor and infuriating old friend, seized the now-forgotten letter that lay beside Albus' plate. "I will need that, thank you. Good afternoon, Headmaster."

And with that, Severus left the Great Hall as quickly as he could without breaking into an ungainly quickstep. If precedent was anything to go by, he'd need all the brandy he could get to survive the rest of the day.

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It was sheer (evil) luck that Severus, on his way out from his next class (Mostly Hufflepuff/Slytherin. Enough said) for some fresh air and time away from the smell of the somewhat popular hair potion he'd been forcing the bored seventh years to try to synthesise without knowledge of the formula or its ingredients. The problem, apart from having to control the restive students of his house and stop the 'accidental' magical burns and mishaps from inciting yet more deep-seated enmity between the fiercely loyal Hufflepuffs and the irritatingly seditious Slytherins, was that Bella, like most witches he knew, often used that potion. By the end of the class, Severus had barely been able to stop himself deducting points from the makers of the potions that came closest to the original formula, and had not waited long to flee the horribly familiar-smelling dungeon classroom for the dank, thankfully sterile smell of the dungeons as a whole.

Restless and worrying compulsively about whether his letter to the Convene organisers had been sent or not – he'd only just managed to send a house elf with it to the Headmaster's office before the lesson, after a long argument with himself about the obvious advantage a phoenix would have over a school owl in speed – Severus found himself somewhat aimlessly patrolling the corridors, all with a view towards reaching the Headmaster's office and demanding proof that that ridiculous phoenix had actually delivered it. He'd just finished brooding on the third floor when the sound of footsteps drew him to the forbidden corridor – if he could have no peace, no idiot, sensation-craving student would be allowed to get their kicks from hanging about and trying to muster up the courage to break into the –

Quirrel.

“Why, S-s-severus,” he said, laughing nervously. “Im-magine m-meeting you here –”

Severus’ lip curled as he came to a halt, not five feet from the slightly trembling Quirrel, who looked as he always did – nervous, anxious, and scared as hell of mean old Severus Snape, all with a faint edge of smugness and rage that seemed to flare into being with every overheard snicker at Professor Quirrel’s stutter, Professor Quirrel’s teaching habits, Professor Quirrel’s mysterious sojourn in Albania and beyond. Quirrel was contemptible, yes – he had been a rather indifferent, shyly pompous fool before his trip out into the wide wild world, and Severus had taken great pleasure in witnessing his broken nature on his return.

However, lately there had been that edge – that odd gleam in the man’s nervous eye, so often averted from Severus’ sharp gaze, the way that stutter seemed to worsen almost deliberately around Severus. And, even worse, the careful smile that had appeared on Quirrel’s face when Antares’ name had come up in the last big staff meeting along with those of the other apprentices. Severus remembered the feeling of having his own knowledge courted, his own excellence polished carefully by the older years who only seemed to notice him when he was achieving brief victory over Potter and Black and Pettigrew and *Lupin* – Severus grimaced, still feeling the sting of that defeat. *The other three are dead or worse, and yet the werewolf remains...bastard, lucky bastard.*

In any case, Severus remembered, and could see the signs. It was almost too easy, if one knew what to look for. The *Impedimenta* Hooch had barely remarked over when describing Antares’ performance in the air to Severus, the Stinging Hexes the boy had let off against the troll with little to no hesitation, the Disarming Charm he’d used to ruthless effect in the same breath – all of these hallmarks of someone taking the time, the effort, to show Antares’ quick eye and deft wand things that he could easily learn and enjoy learning.

Severus sneered at Quirrel now, disregarding the usual rules of propriety that constrained his behaviour towards the bastard around the students. There was no one to see this, and he meant it to count for something, anything –

“And I suppose you have a good reason for skulking about this corridor, Quirinus...?” *Just the right inflection, the right amount of sharpness in one’s tone, and there – genuinely quivering Quirrel.*

“S-skulking, S-s-severus? What could m-make you th-think that?”

Severus restrained a nasty smile. For all his mysterious smugness, the man was so easy to destabilise, if one went about it the right way. “Why, the fact that I have seen you lingering here before. I suppose you believe yourself more fit to guard the Stone than all the protections Dumbledore imposed on it –”

“D-don’t b-be ridiculous, Severus,” Quirrel said hastily, cutting him off. “I r-really don’t know why y-y-you are so s-suspicious of me –”

“Call it a habit,” Severus sneered, turning away as Quirrel began to retreat. This was what he hated most about his encounters with Quirrel – he could do no more than threaten, and he had a feeling that Quirrel knew that very well. Then again, all Severus had done for years was threaten and, more often than not, deliver on the threat. Occasionally, he really did get through to Quirrel, which was cheering, considering that the man’s mind was like a thick fog of uncertainty and deep-seated fear, both emotions laced through all his murky memories so thickly that it sickened Severus to peer into his mind for too long.

Severus, ignoring the fading sound of the stumble and shamble of Quirrel’s terrified footsteps, finally relinquished his vague idea of going to Albus’ office in favour of a rather more soothing alternative: a trip to the library. Even if he could in no way apply the fairly Dark curses and hexes found in the Restricted Section to Quirrel’s twitchy person, it did tend to soothe him to imagine that he might. And besides, few places soothed his natural restlessness like the library did.

He reached there almost too quickly – one minute, he was striding along the corridors and dispensing random glares to passing students; the next, he was approaching the ajar doors of the library and quelling a group of giggling students as they emerged with a single look. As Severus entered the library, he was graced with the usual piercing stare from Irma, who was busy checking out books for the small knot of students surrounding her desk. Nodding shortly, Severus immediately turned, heading straight for the Restricted Section and cutting a swathe of unhappy silence as he threaded his way through the tables and around the bookshelves, pausing occasionally to reprimand or question troublemakers and those hapless students already in bad standing with him so early on in the winter term.

Once Severus ensconced in the ominous quiet of the Section, Severus went straight to the shelf with the darkest texts, not brushing against any of the shivering or vibrating books and giving a wide berth to one or two in particular, his movements smooth and easy from years of practice. He soon found the book he'd had in mind – *Thye Divurtment of Deebeberayte Deiscoverie* – and had it open to the well-worn page he required even before he reached one of the smaller tables in the Section.

An hour later saw Severus scribbling rapidly on another piece of parchment he'd Conjured in haste, noting down an idea for rearranging key elements in the *Denudavi* potion he'd come across on page 358 – he'd heard of the spell family, and had had the misfortune to see a known impostor literally stripped of her complex glamour in one of his first meetings of the Death Eaters. Severus, pausing, slammed the book shut – if his idea worked, the potion could be painted onto any organic surface with full transference of its suggestion ability instead of needing materials for the room or object being built to be steeped in the potion in complicated, precisely calculated sequences and time allotments. And *that* would mean that any Tom, Dick or Harry could purchase more powerful detectors and that the Ministry could commission special interrogation chambers with less of an emphasis on torture and more on simple Legilimency and disguise penetration.

Of course, everyone would quibble over the inherent Darkness of the spell family at first. But when people realised they could buy trust and absolute knowledge of their visitors' and acquaintances' lives...Severus chuckled to himself. A pity he would not be able to test such a thing on Quirrel – he'd never come across such a man for clumsy, yet somehow efficient concealment.

Rising stiffly from the table, Severus stuffed the parchment and quill away in his pockets, replacing the book on his way out of the Restricted Section, far too busy thinking to do more than sneer when he noticed that Granger girl's bushy head bent over something at one of the more secluded tables...next to Antares?

Blinking, Severus looked back. What on earth? He clearly remembered the girl's almost pathetic gratitude at being saved from the troll – somewhat understandable under the circumstances, yes – but he also remembered the clear look of discomfort Antares had exchanged with the Zabini boy as he too was hugged in turn. Changing direction with a sharp turn, Severus mulled over the idea in his mind, worrying at it like a sore tooth. He simply could not understand why Antares would willingly associate with Granger outside of class, even if it was in such a secluded corner of the library as this. From what Severus had deigned to notice, none of her peers seemed to like her, apart from Lupin and Weasley, whose friendship with her was almost certainly founded on mutual need for academic help and (mostly for Granger) social standing.

But Antares didn't have any need for Granger's freakishly perfect, overwritten, pompous essays – though his handwriting was still quite the trial to read, his reasoning was as sound as one could expect of an eleven-year-old apprentice, and he had a somewhat morbid turn of phrase that suited the study of Potions quite well. If anyone was in need of help, it was probably Granger – Severus pessimistically supposed about half of the drivel in her too-long essays was produced by the age-old practice of textbook regurgitation, a habit that so many brilliant or merely clever students found it hard to shake off especially if they came from Muggle backgrounds, and therefore had only a limited perspective of magic and its many facets and principles.

“Granger, is that *Ars Decoctum* you are reading?” Severus demanded sharply, looming over the obviously startled pair. Granger coloured and stammered a reply in the affirmative, but it was Antares’ reaction that caught Severus’ eye. In stead of the usual hostile or annoyed look that tended to express itself on the boy’s thin face was a closed, fearful one – one that, come to think of it, Severus had seen last week. An expression that, if Severus thought even harder, the boy had been sporting intermittently over the latter half of the Christmas holiday, the presence of which had led Severus to quietly assent to Bella’s somewhat silly theory of Antares’ new secret. “Give it here, immediately. That will be three points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger, for removing a book from the Restricted Section without appropriate permission.”

Granger gasped. “But I didn’t! It was lying around in the Defence section, and –”

“A likely story,” Severus hissed, cutting her off with no further ado. He knew, of course, of the few charms developed by enterprising students wishing to coax relatively stable books out of the Restricted Section without the necessary teacher approval required for fifth year and below – he’d developed one, himself, after all. But of greater interest was the nervous look on Antares’ face as Severus prodded him and Granger to their feet. “Black, explain yourself – don’t think I didn’t see you sharing the book with Granger –”

“She did just find it, Professor,” Antares said, blushing uncomfortably as Severus pushed them aside, running a strict eye over the two small scrolls of parchment that lay next to the fat copy of *Ars Decoctum*, both partly covered with childish scribbles. “I swear, sir – she wanted help with finding the Latin derivative of that potion you asked us to study, and you always talked of *Ars* as the definitive –”

“That does not excuse reading material that is not permitted to you, Mr. Black,” Severus said, shutting the book with a heavy thud after noting the page – *if Granger was really researching transformation potions for that easy assignment I set them, I’ll eat my cloak* – “Where did you say you found it?”

“He didn’t find it, sir; I did,” Granger volunteered tremulously, looking alarmed as Severus turned an impatient frown on her. “I was looking in the Defence section, and –”

“In order to find a book to aid you in discovering the derivative of a potion, Miss Granger?” Severus snorted. “That’s another point from Gryffindor for telling such clumsy tales.” Granger opened her mouth to protest, but was nudged rather sharply by the still strangely silent Antares. “And you, Black, see that you present yourself in my office at eight thirty this evening. I cannot help but wonder why you chose to go along with such paltry lies as Miss Granger saw fit to try to feed me – perhaps a little dialogue will be sufficient to reveal your reasons, foolish as they are.”

“Yes, sir.” Antares sounded a little sullen, but a lot more cowed than usual. Severus stifled the urge to take a look at his emotions, despite the acute feeling that the boy was hiding something. After a stern look in both of the students’ directions, Severus hurried back to the Restricted Section, *Ars Decoctum* in tow, but not without a backward glance or two in the direction of Antares and Granger, who were now conversing in low, sharp whispers. Severus, gritting his teeth against his impatient curiosity, set the book down on the first table he found in the Restricted Section and set about following Antares as he broke away from Granger and set off clearly for the library exit. Despite the fact that Severus knew Antares would present himself in his office at the time he’d specified, he simply could not wait till then to ask the question uppermost in his mind.

Antares left the library quickly after retrieving his ragged schoolbag from under the table he’d shared with Granger, not stopping to browse the shelves or even chat to the small knot of Ravenclaw boys Severus had seen him and the Zabini boy speaking to on occasion. No – he simply slipped out of the library and began hastening in the general direction of the stairs that led to the dungeons. Severus caught up to him just as he was about to enter the stairwell, skirting his small form sharply and stepping deliberately into his path.

“Professor,” Antares began, but Severus did not let him finish.

“You,” he hissed, seizing hold of Antares’ free arm and dragging him into the stairwell, “will explain to me why on earth you are wasting your time with that foolish –”

“She’s not!” Antares protested, weakly. “She –”

“ – is a mudblood. I would have thought that you, of all people –”

“Sir, with all due respect,” Antares said, trying fruitlessly to wrestle free of Severus’ grip, his bag thumping Severus uselessly in the side, “I’m half-and-half. Blood doesn’t mean much except having pricks like Draco look down on you, for crying out loud. *He’s* never beaten Granger in anything, or even me –”

“Still, it is highly unwise,” Severus allowed, giving Antares a dark glare to stop him fidgeting uselessly as they descended the slightly creaking, mostly empty staircase. “Don’t be a fool, boy – all your case for acceptance from your yearmates is bound up in your magical ability and your Quidditch ability. Surely you know that even that –”

But Antares was scowling at the floor, the slightly faraway look on his face signifying his lack of attention to what Severus was saying. “Acceptance, yeah, *right* –”

“Excuse me?” Severus snapped, halting abruptly. “Are you even paying attention to what I am saying?”

“All that stuff about acceptance is rot,” Antares said thickly, scratching fiercely at his hair. “If my friends don’t think I’m good enough for Slytherin in the first place –”

Severus sneered. “And why should they? You associate with Granger, you little fool –”

“And so what?” Antares shot back, eyes bright with anger. Severus stared at him, wondering what had brought this little fit on. Surely – “If ignoring advantages and useful friendships with people is what Slytherins do, then I’m bloody well in the wrong house –”



But now, Severus could hardly hear what the boy was saying, as the fragmented memory cycling behind those fierce eyes was far too compelling not to –

*“Antares, please, you know how he is –”*

*“...how people call me names behind my back, and you won’t tell me! If you tell anyone about my lessons, I’ll –”*

Antares laughed, nastily. “You’re not even listening to me, are you?” He closed his eyes momentarily, jolting Severus out of his mind a little unpleasantly. “Is there anything else you wanted, Professor?”

“I hope,” Severus said, immediately, “that your ridiculous affiliation with Professor Quirrel –”

“You’ve got to be joking,” Antares breathed, eyes wide with more anger. “I can’t believe –”

“If you remember our conversation at Christmas *at all* –”

“You tell me I’m not worthy of Slytherin, then tell me to stop sneaking around behind your back,” Antares said, a little shakily. “Isn’t that it?”

Severus rolled his eyes, praying for patience. Had nothing Bella said sunk into the boy’s memory? Had he merely pretended to listen, or – “Antares, you simply cannot comprehend –”

But, suddenly – “Fine,” Antares ground out, staring at the floor between them, resentment pouring off him in waves. Severus stared down at him, distrusting the little promise with every fibre of his being. The staircase suddenly began to move under them, filling the silence with grinding and creaking as it ground nearer and nearer to the door to what Severus thought might be the second floor. Just before it had carried them past it, it stopped, and the abrupt silence seemed to shake Antares out of some sort of trance.

“If I may be excused, Professor?” he said, practically hurling the words into Severus’ frowning face. Severus thought of refusing as the boy adjusted his schoolbag on his shoulder it had been beginning to slip off with an angry movement and began to edge towards the door,

but the door opened and admitted two sleepy-looking third years, and Severus decided that gaining peace of mind on the Quirrel issue as regarded Antares was not worth conducting business with the boy in such a public manner. So he followed the edgy Antares through the door with nary an extra glance in the direction of the frightened students, and cut in front of Antares again, stopping him with a hard look.

“We will discuss this matter later,” Severus said, quietly. Firmly. Antares’ eyes looked anywhere but at his face during the deliberate pause in his speech, and for a moment, Severus could not help but feel a little sorry for him. On one hand, Severus remembered the way he’d had to struggle to gain even his miniscule place in the order of things at Hogwarts, and remembered how well the teaching and tutoring from Lucius, Evan and others had stood him in those years.

Then again, he’d been a Death Eater at eighteen, largely because everyone that taught him had done the same thing. And despite the fact that there was no such radical group available for Antares to espouse these days, Bella would skin him alive if he did not do everything in his power to prevent the boy from becoming susceptible to the advances of such organisations.

So it fell to Severus to let go of Antares’ arm, wondering a little dazedly when he’d taken hold of the boy again, and say a few words. “Not this evening, of course – I can tolerate only so much of you every day,” he said, matter-of-factly, ignoring the way relief coursed over Antares’ face. “Get out of my sight, boy. And think twice about associating with Gryffindors, if your status in my house is so important to you.” Surprisingly, Antares gave a small, almost contrite nod, and stayed respectfully in one place as Severus turned away from him. And then, when Severus looked back, the boy was heading once more for the stairwell, a thoughtful, if still rather angry look on his face.

Severus sighed. There was only so much one could do.

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Severus woke slowly, and, for a minute, did not quite remember where he was. Then the dank smell filtered into his nostrils, and his

lidded eyes noted the slightly greasy white pillow. Bella had forcefully shod the pillows in his bedroom (their bedroom) at Spinner's End in soft beige – these pillows were white and a bit dirty. Not beige in the least.

For a long moment, Severus remained still, his mind slowly running through the events of last night. He'd been a little less depressed by the end of the day, in comparison to how depressed he'd been at the beginning of it, but not much. The situation with Quirrel now continued to cycle in his mind's eye, the apprehension and worry about what such a man as Quirrel could do if he obtained the Philosopher's Stone under all their noses wearing away at his natural urges. Soon enough, Severus felt he was awake enough to stand and drag his recalcitrant body into the bathroom to get ready to leave for breakfast – Quirrel needed an eye kept on him, and Severus had been far too remiss this week in making note of what meals the man attended or missed, and whether the man tried to speak to the other teachers that had participated in guarding the Stone.

The rapid shower woke him up admirably, and by the time Severus finally finished buttoning himself into one of his more comfortable sets of robes, he felt quite awake and ready to face the day, Quirrel or no Quirrel, depression or no depression.

*Bella or no Bella*, he added inwardly, firmly shutting the door on his familiar-smelling bathroom. To minimise his slight obsession with her smell, Severus had allowed himself to use Bella's preferred bath lotion, but had thought to prevent it from distracting him by spelling his hair to neutralise the smell. Whether it would work remained to be seen. Whether he needed it to work remained to be seen, too – *if I remember correctly, I forgot to see if Albus sent the letter to the Concoction Convene in the first place, yesterday evening...*

Severus passed the short time it took to reach the Great Hall in this way, trying to look critically at his – well, at this thing with Bella, and the way he was handling it by resorting to telling boldfaced lies to his employer, mentor and sometime confidant and friend all so he could get away from Hogwarts for a few days.

Unsurprisingly, he gave up as soon as he entered the Great Hall and saw Quirrel laughing nervously at something a slightly disconcerted Minerva was saying. There were far more important things afoot than his minor obsession with Bella – there had to be.

Severus approached the staff table cautiously, with a bored look on his face. He sat down with equal diffidence, carefully choosing a seat far enough from Quirrel that would allow him to observe the nervous fool at work without raising suspicion. Coincidentally, it was a lot nearer to Albus Dumbledore's seat than Severus usually went for. A sad necessity, of course. His need to avoid alerting the chatting Quirrel to his actions outweighed – oh dear.

"Morning, Severus – breakfast agreeing with you today?" Severus stifled a sigh, and forced the accompanying smidgens of concern from his face. Albus had that careful smile on his face again. It was *maddening* –

"I suppose you haven't dropped that ridiculous idea of retrying that useless little ritual?"

"Useless, Severus?" Albus said, deftly buttering another slice of toast as that irritating 'All Rituals Are Important' look came over his face. "That ritual is the most effective way of resolving guilt, and has been for ears –"

" – which is why you have continued to repeat it without success," Severus finished snidely. "After the first three failed attempts, I would have kept the stupid item and considered my debt paid."

"And that, my friend, is where we disagree," Albus said, with another forced smile. Severus restrained himself from rolling his eyes, and finally decided that he would stay the extra hours today, if only to keep the Headmaster from guilting himself into a stupor, or worse, retracing the ritual to its source and finding some sort of nebulous presence of the Dark Lord in place of ordinary magical disturbance or whatnot.

"Really, Severus," Filius piped up, from between them, "you mean to say you would not continue to pursue the ritual if it continued to fail? This is the Ritual of Returning we are discussing, I suppose...?"

Severus sighed, and prepared himself for yet another chiding, disguised as instruction.

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After the rather boring breakfast ended, Severus felt no real inclination to hurry back to his classroom to confront the influx of frightened students that would be waiting in his classroom. However, as hanging about at the table in hopes of receiving a late reply from the organisers of the Concoction Convene (nothing had come during the usual morning owl rush) would be rather below his dignity, he was forced to leave the Great Hall as soon as he could bring himself to. The walk to his dungeons was oddly calming in the face of the highly irritating discussion with Dumbledore and Flitwick, which Severus found himself still cycling through his mind as he blasted open the door to his classroom and stalked in. It took reminding himself that he would be seeing Bella anyway to take his mind off the hours he would lose in watching over Dumbledore's next attempt on the Returning Ritual to get his mind back onto the lesson before him, as well as the equally salient knowledge that the Convene had not yet even given permission for him to present himself at the event, which he would need to leave school at all.

Mildly infuriated by it all, Severus snapped out a page reference for today's potion, an essentially harmless one for soothing burns. He knew very well that it was one that was dangerous in case of method misinterpretation, but also knew that holding the students in this class, the ever-dreadful Gryffindor/Slytherin assortment of first years, back because of Neville Lupin's ability to convert even non-volatile ingredients into flesh-eating potions would be counterproductive in the long run. So Severus wrote out extra ingredients and carefully described the steps for the potion and ordered everyone to shut their books and begin, and told himself that the stress of dealing with the usual results of this irritating bunch of students was all for their own good.

The ensuing class was, as always, mildly disastrous. For all the desperate instruction he was given by a perpetually scowling Antares, Neville never seemed to be able to grasp even the simplest concepts. Despite his misgivings and general frustration on the matter, Severus continued to put the idiot boy on the spot, forbidding that Antares'

quick hands do all the work, partly in the hope that Neville would eventually get some basics into his thick head and partly because it was deeply pleasant to see that sick look on the little shit's face when he realised that he couldn't coast on through the lesson this time around.

'This time around' *this* time had resulted a spilled cauldron and some sort of wood-eating acid that Severus found oddly similar to an industrial-strength one he'd studied once for extra credit in his NEWTS a long time ago, and cost Gryffindor – "...ten points! If you must know, Lupin, this class is *not* for the express purpose of threatening the lives of your classmates. Next time, when Black is kind enough to instruct you, pay attention." Antares sighed almost audibly as he began to pick through the smoking ruins of the desk he'd shared with Neville in order to retrieve his cauldron, his unharmed bag and books being at the usual prudent distance.

Severus, satisfied to see that no silly tantrums were being thrown at the sight of the charred uselessness that now represented Antares' potion-making kit, continued to speak. "And do get out of my sight, all of you – I require five inches on the ingredients of today's potion and why they produce such a violent reaction as Lupin's little mess if carelessly combined. And that includes you, Lupin – your expertise will *not* be required clean up the result of your stupidity today, thank you. I'm more inclined to think you'd injure yourself in the process than do anything to help."

As the Slytherins in the class snickered, Neville scowled, first at his hastily bandaged hands and then at Antares' irritated face, and joined Weasley and Granger (who, probably out of sheer survival instinct, had chosen to associate with both boys) on his way out. Antares simply returned the scowls with a cool look and busied himself with salvaging some of his ingredients, not even responding to the almost sympathetic look Granger gave him as she left with the other Gryffindors.

*Perhaps he's finally come to his senses*, Severus mused, placing a preservation charm on the submitted potion vials on his desk. Then again, the boy didn't seem to have come to an understanding with Zabini and the Davis girl, who he only made minimal eye contact with,

though they waited for him to pack up his things and approach Severus briefly for the usual dull exchange on when and how his destroyed possessions would be replaced.

“Thank you, sir. Goodbye, sir,” Antares droned, already halfway out the door. Severus sighed, shutting the slightly open door with a flick of his wand and flopping gracelessly back into his chair, tiredly reminding himself that he would need to collect another letter from the boy before he left. If he left.

Sighing again, he rose and began to assess the damage Lupin Junior’s stupid mistakes had left behind.

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Lunch was a much better meal than breakfast, as Severus, wholly uninterested in exposing himself to more censure from Flitwick yet again (the man always carried over their most volatile discussions to the next meal), found himself trooping up to the staff room with a pilfered plate of food in tow; the hot meal of fish and chips secured from a quick visit to the kitchens. Though the notice on the door about an impromptu staff meeting (for as many of the participants in the protection of the Stone as possible) that would quickly follow lunch meant that Severus would have to escape the room that much quicker, it was quiet, peaceful and nicely devoid of students, Dumbledore, Flitwick and Quirrel.

And, halfway through eating his fish, Severus’ estimation of having lunch here went up by a sizeable amount. Analyzing his immediate reaction to the insistent pecking on the nearest window took much lower precedence than his immediate reaction to the sight of the gaudy blue seal Severus spotted on the letter as the window slid obligingly open with no direction from him whatsoever. Severus stopped smiling over the stiff parchment as soon as he realised he was doing so, but did not begrudge himself the display of his satisfaction (a fat chip or two, as well as a sliver of fried fish) to the grateful owl as it hovered nearby.

After receiving that, eating became more of a secondary activity than anything else, for Severus was far too busy perusing the schedule of activities he was supposed to be attending in Omsk and starting to

feel like he would actually be attending – especially the talk on real concept duplication (possibly related to the prevalence of Crumple-Horned Snornacks in wizarding mythology), which was on Monday morning. Surely his Monday classes (mostly fourth year and sixth year groups) could withstand his absence without undue stress or syllabus disruption? If he remembered correctly, he'd been thinking of setting a research essay for the sixth years, and the fourth years were supposed to be doing something quite silly that didn't necessarily need his supervision.

Severus sat up a little straighter, unable to stop himself smiling again. Albus *would* owe him something for sacrificing precious hours at – ahem – the Convene. It wouldn't be entirely without precedent for him to suggest that the lazy bastard cover one or two of his classes in exchange for –

“Why, Severus! I didn't think you'd get the notice about the staff meeting...” Severus only marginally suppressed a yelp of surprise and consternation as – *speak of the devil* – the Headmaster gave him a batty smile. “Oh, sorry, Minerva; do come in.” Severus directed a glare at the already re-rolling letter from the Convene, but his disgust was mostly reserved for himself. Gloating had always been a problem with him, albeit a well-managed one. Yet, despite his careful supervision, his glee still occasionally got the better of him.

“So this is where you are!” Flitwick exclaimed, bouncing around Albus and into a seat beside him. “I thought we'd never continue our discussion –”

“I'm afraid your discussion with Severus may have to wait, Filius,” Albus said jovially, as Pomona, Quirrel and an unfamiliar-looking seventh year came in, shutting the door behind them. “As you may remember from our last little meeting, we agreed that Miss Lahiri here would help test some of our protections for the Stone as a part of her extra credit NEWT Project. Now –”

Severus partially tuned out, setting aside his plate and watching the reactions to the slightly abashed girl's hesitant narrative of how she'd had to be rescued from Hagrid's monstrosity and had not even gotten through the trapdoor to the chambers of the other protections in the



first place. McGonagall and Flitwick exchanged a triumphant look, Pomona Sprout sighed and smiled reassuringly at Lahiri, and Quirrel looked a little more distressed than pleased.

“...for your help, Rani. I assume that the *Reticum* spell we cast on you is still functioning? And of course, you remember the date for its removal – yes. Off you go, then.” Albus turned his attention back to the now fidgeting group of teachers as Lahiri made her exit behind him. “Now, is anyone still in favour of providing back-door solutions in case of circumvention?”

Silence ensued. Quirrel twitched violently, but probably dared not do more than shake his head along with Flitwick, Minerva and Pomona.

Albus beamed. “Well, then – the current alert system stands, then. Good day, everyone.”

Rolling his eyes, Severus got slowly to his feet, impatiently tucking away the letter in one of his robe pockets while directing a significant look in the Headmaster’s direction to signify his presence in the old man’s office later today. Albus merely nodded in reply on his way out, already engaged in a conversation with Minerva and Filius, who had obviously (thankfully) forgotten whatever he’d been about to take up with Severus again. Severus sighed, looking around for his plate and levitating it onto the table where all of the refreshments were served during the normal staff meetings, knowing that the house elves would likely pick it up soon enough.

“*That* was a waste of a perfectly good fifteen minutes,” Severus muttered, loud enough that Pomona, who was determinedly visiting said refreshment table to investigate the small plate of biscuits that had appeared there just as Albus ended the meeting. She chuckled, picking messily through the fragrant selection. “Why the Headmaster felt the need to have a seventh year tell us the protections on that overvalued bit of sandstone are unbeatable, I will never know.”

“Besides, we’re hardly protecting the Stone from students,” Pomona grumbled, settling down on a comfortable sofa with her bounty. “I doubt he’d have bothered if it hadn’t been Rani Lahiri’s project – that girl could talk you into committing suicide for her benefit.”

Severus raised his eyebrows in slight surprise. He'd never trusted the charming Lahiri girl after he'd discovered that she'd been behind a mass protest involving sixth years and below against random Potions testing, but had always known Pomona to support the Hufflepuff girl's sometimes inflammatory actions during staff meetings.

Pomona noticed his expression, and snorted. "Oh, Minerva's out of the room," she declared, waving a biscuit airily. "You know how she is about Rani. Anyway, in my opinion, Albus should have had one of us attempt to get past instead."

"Count me off the list of volunteers," Severus replied, sneering. Then, spotting Quirrel hanging around the door uncertainly, he couldn't resist. "What about you, Quirinius? Or would it be too nerve-wracking?"

"V-v-very f-funny, S-Severus," Quirrel stammered, looking a little more smug than he had a right to, considering the snide remark Severus had just sent his way. "W-we aren't a-a-all m-mind r-readers, I'll h-h-have you know."

Severus stiffened. "Excuse me?"

"I think he's referring to the fact that Legilimens are mythically able to sense intent and method from inanimate objects," Pomona said, smiling almost kindly. "That is all nonsense, don't you know?"

"D-d-dreadfully s-s-sorry, then," Quirrel said, shooting Severus a pointed glance. "Oh, I-I-I-look at the time..."

Pomona gasped, craning her head round to look at the timepiece on the wall behind Severus. "Oh, indeed! Goodness, I must be off." She rose immediately, spelling her remaining stash of biscuits into a paper bag and tucking it somewhere inside her dirty robes as she made for the door. "Good day, Severus – Quirinius –"

"G-Good d-day, P-P-Pomona," Quirrel said, leaning back to let her pass by him. He didn't even look in Severus' direction as he tried to sidle out the door, mumbling something over his shoulder.

Teeth grinding, Severus strode after him, decorum forgotten, and flicked a pale, insubstantial hand into being. It grabbed hold of Quirrel's arm and firmly tugged him back into the room past Severus, allowing him to slam the door to the staff room shut. "You must believe me very foolish," Severus hissed, "to let you leave after making such an interesting observation, Quirinius."

Quirrel's eyes were wide with fear and accusation despite the fact that the insubstantial hand had vanished, and the only thing he had to fear from Severus was the fact that his wand was already drawn. "I – I d-d-don't know w-what you're –"

"Spare me. Why don't you explain your little observation about my skills, instead?"

"S-s-skills?"

"You well know that unauthorised, unconsented use of Legilimency is illegal, Quirinius," Severus said, forcing calm into his tone. There was no need to display the sheer amount of anger that was now brewing within him, really – "So such a statement as yours implies –"

"N-nothing, if y-you d-d-don't use it i-i-illegally," Quirrel interrupted, the accusation on his face deepening, melding together with a determination that Severus really disliked the look of. "S-so –"

"And I suppose you have some sort of source or factual evidence secreted away in that disgusting turban of yours, silently incriminating away...?"

More determination. A hint of smugness, even – what on earth was going on here? "I'll m-make n-no comment, S-Severus."

"Really. And I suppose your unimpeachable sources also came up with some sort of reason behind my illegal mining of their pitiful minds? Potions research I wish to duplicate, to make myself millions and thereby cheat them out of their honest, hard-earned congratulations? Yet another useless examination system that I wish to steal and patent for my personal use...?"

“J-jealousy!” Quirrel insisted, and Severus suddenly, quietly realised that his occasional incursions into Antares’ stupid little head might have been counter-productive. *Especially* if the little berk had decided to spill all to his new Best Friend and Teacher – “J-j-just because a y-young b-boy wished to l-learn s-some –”

*This must be headed off – immediately.* “I assume we are speaking of that Black boy?”

Quirrel sputtered into silence, his nervous lack of speech belying the triumphant look in his eye. Severus almost smiled – finally, a way to resolve this sorry situation. And all in such an enjoyable way...

“He’s told you of my opposition to his continuing to learn, so to speak, at your feet has he?” Severus sighed, not bothering to wait for an answer before continuing on. “Well, there’s no problem here, then.”

Quirrel blinked.

Inwardly rejoicing at the look of total surprise on Quirrel’s face, Severus surged on. “Do be careful with him, of course. I was forced to take him shopping for his school things – the society Black mixes with leaves a great deal to be desired, and his taste in knowledge runs a little to the bizarre. The *very* bizarre.” Feigning weariness, Severus went on, occasionally checking Quirrel’s stupid face to see if the reaction he was going for was being produced. “Think very hard about how he knew what I used on him once – at his mother’s behest, mind you – was Legilimency at all.”

Quirrel twitched, and began to look strained.

“I don’t suppose you’ve also noticed that he’s formed a gang with the Zabini boy and the Davis girl in his year?” Severus continued, blatantly embellishing his tone (and the truth) as he went on. “Manageable now, of course – but it remains to be seen in the future. McGonagall didn’t tell you about how they all ganged up on that Greengrass girl in their year, did she?” Quirrel mutely shook his head. “Interesting – she’s usually so happy to pass on the bad news about Slytherins in general. But from what I heard, when I talked to Miss Greengrass, it was far more to do with her refusing to lend the Black boy her estranged sister’s spell almanac for his personal

consumption than to do with her sister's deplorable situation." Severus took a languid look at his watch-face, but wasn't quite absorbed in it enough to miss the look of consternation that passed across Quirrel's face. "So, there you have it – the whys and the wherefores on my foolish venture into that little idiot's mind. So, unless you have any other sources..."

Quirrel shook his head emphatically, consternation now replaced with the normal fear. Severus nodded briskly, levitating a biscuit over to him from the rather depleted plate on the refreshment table in the corner. "Well, then. Do try to understand the full picture before trying to threaten me again, Quirinius. Good day."

Biscuit in hand, Severus left the room, a smile trying its best to weasel its way out onto his face. The Quirrel-Antares Situation was halted, Albus would be indebted to him for a class or two, and he would be seeing Bella again, later this evening. To have solved all that during lunchtime was well worth being – he checked his watch again – five minutes late for that irritating Slytherin/Ravenclaw class. Which he had every intention of hurrying out the door as soon as possible, so he'd have time to Floo Bella with the good news.

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After a whirlwind class full of accidents and one unnecessarily overwrought Ravenclaw bursting into tears at the vigorous tirade Severus felt obliged to dish out for the little brat's heinously slow stirring technique, Severus soon found himself alone with the mess from a hasty class and – most importantly – fifteen minutes with which to Floo Bella and clean up before ascending to Albus' office for the ritual and the careful manipulation of possibly Monday-freeing guilt and obligation on his employer's part.

Warding his office haphazardly to prevent eavesdropping, Severus threw a sizeable pinch of Floo Powder into the crackling flames and, as they turned green, stuck his head into them and called out: "Spinner's End!" Squashing a sudden urge to blindly Summon a brush to deal with his probably quite frazzled hair, Severus shut his eyes and bore the horrible sense of dislocation as he spun away towards his destination. Hopefully, Bella would be present.

Hopefully. “Bella?” Severus tried, his voice cracking as his eyes readjusted slowly to the new vantage point. “Bella? BELLA –”

“For goodness’ sake –” Severus saw something move out of the corner of his eye, and repositioned his head accordingly as best as was possible. An unnecessary sense of relief filled him as he saw a familiar figure start into the living room from the kitchen. “Severus?” Bella began to hurry closer as soon as she caught sight of him. “Is there something –”

“Everything is fine,” Severus said quickly, his eyes following Bella’s fine form as she dropped to her knees before him. “I just –”

“Oh, dear – I better get back to the fish, then –” And, with that, she’d hurried to her feet and stormed from the room, putting impatient fingers to her hair, which was starting to loosen from a rough braid. Severus sighed, his heart sinking as Bella went out of sight. He supposed he’d have to be late for the irritatingly necessary meeting with the Headmaster, but – “Right, everything seems to be in order,” Bella called out, her calm voice preceding her as she returned from the kitchen at a much slower pace. “Are you coming home this weekend, or...”

Severus flushed at the word ‘home’, and hoped hard that she didn’t spot it. It was possible that she didn’t, as Bella had just begun to loosen her braid, her gaze fixed on a spot far above his floating head as she carefully pulled her hair loose. But then her eyes returned to his, and her lips gave a sardonic twitch as he flushed even more under her scrutiny.

“I suppose that means yes...?”

“Yes,” Severus snapped, fighting the hungry flush that seemed to be spreading down his neck now. “Not now – I have a meeting with the Headmaster. But perhaps this evening...”

“Mmm, perhaps,” Bella said, her eyes darkening promisingly, and Severus sighed, conceding that he’d probably be late to the meeting with Albus, if out of sheer necessity of getting his body back under control. “How is Antares?”

Severus snorted, clearly remembering the boy's odd behaviour and the following confrontation with Quirrel, and began to explain, glad to have something other than the way even his nipples were taking notice of his false proximity to Bella.

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*A/N: Just a quick sigh and contemplation on how much I love writing about Severus, and about his fairly OCD ways and nefarious schemes and wanky behaviour. He's quite the horrid person, but isn't it infinitely more interesting to read about his nastiness :D?*

*Hopefully, all of that manoeuvring came out right in the end. This was an oddly complex chapter to write, because of how much I had to make sure was done. Thanks be to snornackcatcher, who kindly informed me of the regulation of the Floo Network as pertains to Hogwarts.*

*And everyone, the next chapter shall be named (as most of you already know, if you've been reading my LJ) Chapter 18: Obfuscation. Thrilling, eh? And oh, it's from Antares' POV.*

## **Chapter 18: Obfuscation**

After a minute of trying to force himself to keep looking through the *Standard Book of Spells (Grade 5)*, Antares allowed his mind to drift off. He was allowed to do it, he told himself, ignoring the nagging sense that urged him to keep looking for detailed directions of how to practice the Silencing Charm he'd only been able to coax the theory of from Professor Flitwick. Really, he was almost on holiday –

"You, Black!" Antares winced. Pity he wasn't on holiday *yet* – Greg, who was advancing towards his table in the library like a small moving mountain, would be far away from Hogwarts then, as would Draco and Vince – "Draco wants a word with you, Black."

Antares didn't look up, though he could spot – and, to a small degree, sense Draco approaching with Vince close behind him. He grimaced and turned the page, feigning ignorance of the way Draco stood rudely close behind his chair, radiating impatience.

"Black, a word," Draco said, almost courteously. Antares maintained his indifferent posture, affecting to look at the page he'd just turned. Which, he suddenly noticed, seemed to have on it the start of a tiny section on Silencing magic, which was what he'd been looking for in the first –

A large hand shoved his shoulder from behind. "Hey! Draco's talking to you, Black!"

"Don't do that, Greg, Pince'll spot us," Draco complained, sliding noisily into the seat beside Antares and trying to sneak a look at the page Antares was now avidly perusing. Sensing the idiot's scrutiny, Antares shut the book with a hard thump, mentally marking the page for later study. There was only so long he could go ignoring Draco, anyway – "I wanted to ask you something, Black."

Antares gave Draco a silent, disdainful once-over, smirking inwardly at how Draco fidgeted and began to radiate annoyance. As creepy as it was being occasionally hit by these odd sense of the stronger feelings from people around him, Antares did enjoy being able to know more or less straight away what insults and methods were working with his irritatingly persistent bully. As he'd found over the



last two months or so, the one that got to Draco the most was calm, indifferent silence.

“I want to know why you’ve gone off Blaise all of a sudden,” Draco said, a little louder than before, as if he somehow believed Antares couldn’t hear him. “And don’t give me that stupid look like you don’t know what I’m talking about –”

“I don’t *know* what you’re talking about, Draco,” Antares said, calmly. “Blaise and I are still friends – not that you care.” And, the funny thing was, Antares was telling the truth, in a sort of limited sense. Despite the awful post-Christmas argument he’d had with Blaise and Tracey (as well as the numerous private skirmishes he’d had with either one of them as they individually tried to corner him and get him to forgive them), their strained collective friendship had somehow knitted itself back together, mostly because Antares, despite his threat, didn’t know the slightest means of going about Obliviating them so selectively. And, because *The Arte of Shielding* had said several times that he would need partners to help him progress by using Legilimency on him, it was pretty much moot that he still talk to them.

“I care,” Draco said, “because I was thinking you might want to hang around with me and these two instead of Blaise and that pathetic Davis thing.”

Antares raised his eyebrows, then turned deliberately, looking Greg and Vince up and down in an exaggerated manner. “You know, I think my current friends are fine, thanks.” Another not-quite-truthful statement – something *The Arte of Shielding* had included as a mandatory exercise to prepare one’s mind for Occlumency. Somehow, it was supposed to help you deceive a Legilimens when they entered your mind, because it made the links between the true and false things in your head much harder to understand. Or something – all Antares privately supposed was that it would also help him to lie better, period, and that was always a good thing.

Draco laughed, a little nastily. “Blaise is a coward, and Davis is a *girl*. Don’t be stupid, Black – you’re better than them.” Smiling blandly, Antares began to gather together his things, carefully concealing the pain those words were close enough to the truth to hurt. Blaise was

rather cowardly about things, and Tracey – well. The fact that she was a girl seemed to gift her with odd notions about repeating things other girls said and did when the boys weren't looking, because, supposedly, 'some of them didn't mean it, really'. A more stupid notion had never occurred to Antares – why would someone say something they didn't mean, in private, to someone else's friend, if they didn't *mean* it?

*Girls are bloody well beyond me, sometimes.* "I don't think of it that way," Antares said quietly, shoving the little bits of parchment away in his robes and quickly weighing whether the concrete knowledge of how to go about trying to do the Silencing Charm was worth the fast talking he'd have to do to convince Pince to let him borrow it, as well as the risk that she might tell Flitwick or question him about the make-believe Charms project Antares had been planning to cite if need be. "Everyone has their strengths, Draco – don't you think so?" And yet another exercise employed – it was always more profitable to an Occlumens for people to reveal their own opinions and character instead of finding out that of the Occlumens. Or so the book said –

"Don't be daft, Black – everyone knows you're the second best with a wand in our year," Draco said, rising as Antares gently pushed back his chair and rose, tucking a small, tightly corked ink bottle into his pockets alongside the folded Cloak and everything else – which, he was relieved to find, after a quick rummage, included the shrunken form of *The Arte*, which he'd need after this useless conversation was finally over.

"Second best, Draco?" Antares said, sneering a little. "And who's the best?"

"Me," Draco said flatly, despite the colour seeping into his cheeks. Stifling a smile, Antares pushed the chair back under his table, giving Greg and Vince covert looks as he did so. Their expressions, even to his relatively unfamiliar eye, looked a lot more fixed than usual – possibly because even *they* knew it wasn't true.

The smile won out, and Antares bent his head a little to hide it. "Well, I suppose you think so."

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Draco snapped, his reply immediate and tense. “Are you saying that –”

Antares shrugged, erasing the amusement from his face as he began to edge away from the table. “I’m saying you think so, Draco. You do, don’t you?” He added an implicit challenge to the last few words, trying not to hope too hard that Draco would take him up on it. *How I’d love to hex his smarmy, bigoted, puffed-up little arse –*

Draco glared at him, but said nothing. Antares smiled then, openly. “I’m afraid it’s a no, Draco. I’m quite comfortable with the friends I already have.” He pushed past Greg and Vince easily, ignoring the scowls they and Draco were all directing towards him. With a quick look around to make certain that he was firmly in Madame Pinch’s line of sight, he continued speaking in a lower, harder tone. “And anyway, you probably already know there are only two lackeys in our dorm. If you didn’t know before, I’m not one of them.”

“Did he – Draco, did he just call us lackeys?” Greg said slowly, anger seeping into his puzzled tone. Draco opened his mouth to reply, and Antares prudently didn’t wait around to see the results, throwing a snide “Good day” over his shoulder as he hurriedly left the library. If he hurried fast enough and took – yes, that turn – they’d have no idea where to find him by the time they had the time to get properly angry at his insult. And, of course, the Occlumency practice he was hurrying off to now would keep him, Blaise and Tracey up until well after curfew, which meant his three potential attackers would be asleep by the time he and Blaise stumbled into bed.

It was a pity that he’d had no time to decide on whether to borrow the Charms book, but then again, he could easily go back to the library tomorrow, well after Draco and the rest were off to the Hogsmeade train station, and immerse himself in the (quite interesting) book until lunch if he felt like it.

It didn’t take time for Antares to manoeuvre his way down to the dungeons just far enough from the Slytherin dorms that he could safely make his way to the empty dungeon he and his friends had been using for weeks and weeks to practice Occlumency and Legilimency together. He avoided the well-used corridors and

hallways as well as he could, and didn't bother doing more than nodding discreetly when he spotted Miles Bletchley, who often hung about the more disused dungeons practicing Beating illegally indoors. Who, consequently, was also the only one of the fourth years on the Quidditch team that had actually agreed (grudgingly) to help Antares retrieve *The Artes Wich Neede No Sichte* from the Restricted section after careful lobbying, judicious bribery and the chance discovery of the rather battered dungeon in which Miles regularly let loose his personal pair of Bludgers for the sake of self-improvement.

Smiling a little at the memory of Miles' shoulders sinking slightly in defeat, Antares jabbed at the correct dungeon door with his wand, muttering an absent '*Alohomora*' under his breath.

"Antares?" Tracey's tone was tinged with surprise as she turned around, wand raised as she prepared to cast another round of *Legilimens* on Blaise, who, Antares noted, was sighing a little in relief. Antares couldn't help smiling at that; Tracey's own version of the spell always felt like a razor. "I thought you had a lesson with...?"

"Quirrel?" Antares closed the door quickly, locking it with an impatient tap before he drew the shrunken *Arte of Shielding* out of his pocket. "Nah, that's tomorrow, I think."

"Right," Tracey said, nodding a little as she turned back to Blaise. Who, predictably, blanched. "Ready for another go?"

"Why don't we practice half-truths instead?" Antares suggested, enlarging the book and rifling through it with the speed that came from almost three months of searching fruitlessly for the myriad referenced pages of techniques that never seemed to turn up when he wanted them. Blaise sighed a little too loudly in relief at that, and Tracey gave him a slightly cross look as Antares sought out one of the rickety chairs they'd had to steal from elsewhere and began to read. "Erm – looks like the half-truths we'll be trying to tell today will be about...the people we hate."

Tracey sighed. "I was hoping we wouldn't get to that one." Antares looked up inquisitively. "I mean, why would I want to talk about Draco any more than I already have to?"

“I don’t hate Draco, actually,” Blaise announced, flopping into another chair nearby, “I just hate his character – everything else is fine, really.”

“Speaking of Draco, you’ll never believe what the prat asked me,” Antares said, setting down the book on the floor with an awkward thump.

“That doesn’t count as a half truth, Antares,” Tracey said, grinning a little. “All right, Blaise, what was it – a Galleon? Two Galleons?”

Antares spluttered. “Excuse me?”

“You’re actually a wicked liar when you put your mind to it,” Blaise said, giving Tracey a dark look. “I just suggested – suggested, mind you – that you’d never make a mistake –”

“Oh, come on, Blaise, don’t be a prat – you linked fingers and swore on your wand, and everything!”

“Well, that’s all moot, because Draco actually *did* ask me something unbelievable,” Antares said loudly, cutting off Blaise before he could deliver a retort in Tracey’s general direction. “In all senses of the word, I swear –”

“But you said –”

“Anyway,” Antares said, ignoring Tracey’s indignant exclamation, “I was in the library, just minding my own business, and suddenly Draco and company are right there. And Draco sits down, while either Greg or Vince is being all ‘answer to your betters, Black’, and Draco asks if I want to be his friend.”

A shocked pause ensued, only to be broken by a half-giggle, half-snort from Blaise. “If we’re supposed to even *believe* that –”

Antares rolled his eyes, kicking Blaise idly in the leg in a half-hearted bid to make him shut up laughing. “I am completely bloody serious, Blaise! I swear, he was all earnest and condescending and all that –”

“Bloody hell, you’re not really serious, are you?” Tracey said, suddenly, her eyes widening in that unnerving way that meant she was probably trying hard to sense emotions from one of them.

“Like I said, perfectly bloody serious,” Antares said, stifling a grin. “He even gave me all these great reasons, then almost challenged me to a duel –”

Blaise coughed. “Oh, come on –”

“Well, depending on the way you read it, what he said could have been a challenge,” Antares said, a little feebly.

“I think you’d have to actually tell us what he said for us to understand,” Blaise pointed out, quite correctly. Antares fought a blush – there was no way, just *no way* he was repeating his private thoughts about being best at magic in their year. “Oh, come on, Antares, we won’t laugh –”

Antares blushed openly, then. “There was nothing to laugh at, thanks.”

“That’s rot, you wouldn’t be blushing if there was –”

“You know, I don’t think this is going anywhere,” Antares said a little loudly, cutting Blaise’s amused comment off. “Let’s just get back to poking each other in the head, all right?”

“Fine,” Tracey said, grinning at Blaise’s crestfallen look. “But we both know what we’ll be looking for in his head, don’t we, Blaise?”

The way Blaise perked up would have been too funny for words if it hadn’t been anything to do with them trying to find out what was (still) embarrassing Antares right now. Sighing dramatically, Antares bent over to retrieve the book from where it lay, carefully ignoring the way Blaise and Tracey were exchanging militant looks. It was obviously going to be a longer session than he’d thought.

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Antares’ premonitions about the length of their Occlumency session were quite right, only for entirely different reasons. Blaise and Tracey

had eventually gotten tired of trying to get past the stubborn, distorting sheen Antares had slipped over the pertinent parts of his conversation with Draco, and had taken to just examining the conversation in its lurid glory instead. By the time they'd all had a thorough look into each other's minds, each of them was taking turns to solemnly ask the person that was not currently Legilimising them to be their friends. Even now, as they tidied the room and reshrunk the book for Antares to carry it unobtrusively back to Slytherin, Blaise kept nudging Antares or Tracey and asking plaintively why they didn't want to be his friends.

The journey back to Slytherin was made, therefore, in higher spirits than usual, and wholly without the tentative looks and rambling questions about whether Antares would let all three of them use the Cloak to get back this time. Antares had made the mistake of relenting once or twice last month, and had learned soon enough that it wasn't worth the bother that followed it. That time, reproachful looks and near-desperate negotiations had ensued after, having overheard Daphne and Pansy giggling over nicknames for everyone in their year, Antares had flatly refused to share the Cloak again, and the whole experience made him steadfastly reinforce his original decision to just not bring the Cloak up with his friends until he'd gotten over their argument. Now, it seemed like Blaise and Tracey had either forgotten about the Cloak, which they now knew that Antares carried all the time out of paranoia, or they'd just decided to let it go. For now.

Sighing inwardly, Antares forced a smile at yet another rendition of Draco's unusual request. It made him feel guilty to do all this, but he knew very well that until he forgave Blaise and Tracey properly for their insults (which he still hadn't), he'd only feel resentful if he shared the Cloak with them. After a minute or so of the three of them watching the entrance to the common room carefully, in case anyone was sneaking out (there'd been several close calls on that front until they'd learnt to wait five minutes or so before trying to enter), they all tiptoed up to the entrance. Antares and Blaise stood guard, eyeing both ends of the corridor while Tracey whispered the password, just in case someone, like them, was returning after curfew. They were inside before long, and, quiet nods and small smiles exchanged, the three of them parted ways and were all asleep before long.

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Morning crept in with the end of an odd nightmare, one that had been dogging Antares' dreams ever since he'd started studying Occlumency with his friends and with the covert help of Professor Quirrel. After starting horribly into consciousness for what had to have been the hundredth time in three months, Antares set to tugging on some clothes as rapidly as possible, his need to be far away from the dorm contrasting painfully with the usual need to reorient himself beneath warm covers after yet another horrid dream. He scowled as he shivered into and under his robes, feeling somehow dirty and disgusting, then grinned a little when he remembered what dirty and disgusting really felt like.

And then, as he stuffed his feet into his boots, the memory of the dream hit him again. For a moment, Antares stood still, willing himself to calm down. It was not rational to be scared of hands. It *wasn't*. Every one of the dreams started out with him feeling warm and cosy and waking up to a disturbance – a disturbance that somehow always ended up with cold, dead hands catching his wrists with a steely grip as someone whispered something low and desperate all around him.

Thinking rationally about it (mostly during Occlumency sessions in which he and his friends were directed to try to think of something that upset them without showing signs of it facially or in their movements), Antares had realised that the disturbances usually featured something or someone that had bothered him during the previous day. Antares slowly began to move again, running over the information he'd puzzled out for himself in his head to calm himself down. These dreams...well, they often included Draco, and sometimes Professor Snape, and (after the first time he'd worked Occlumency into their conversation and had seen the stunned look and strangely, yet understandably vindictive expression on the man's face as Antares continued to stumble through his hints as to why he needed it) even Professor Quirrel. Blaise and Tracey had made appearances after the Cloak fiasco last month, and so had Miles Bletchley, when Antares had been frustrated by the way the overgrown idiot kept trying to get him to steal one of the older, less used sets of the Hogwarts Quidditch balls in payment for his help.



Tonight, the dream had been – Antares smiled, grimly – purer, with less distractions. He'd known almost immediately which dream it was unlike most of the time, and could almost hear the hands coming closer, and when he'd woken up, his bedclothes had been unusually warm, probably from (as Bella called it) magical stress.

*Well*, Antares thought, stubbornly, *whatever it's really about, I don't need it in my life*. And he didn't, especially with this holiday coming round. Antares slipped his hand into his robe pocket, making sure the Cloak – the source of all this trouble – was there. It was, and Antares lost no time in whipping it out and ducking under it, so he could leave the dorm unseen, if not totally unheard. As great as it was having something so useful and so precious in his possession, the acrobatic lying he'd had to go through so far to protect it really, really sucked from time to time.

Really, this Easter holiday was a prime example. Antares sighed quietly, slipping out of his bed for good. Any other Cloakless year, he'd have been the first to opt for his mother's company – despite the long hours she'd always worked, she usually managed to do something fun for Easter. And, barring that, she always told stories at Easter instead of Christmas – long, juicy ones about the Blacks and the other pureblood families and their strange goings-on, and even scary ones about the last war and the one before that. Of course, she'd never really told him in detail about the things the Dark Lord had done or made his little gang do, or even about just how many places Grindelwald set on fire before people started to try to stop him. No, Bella had covered those gaps with things about dresses and mad customers and the usual folk tales about Morgana and Merlin and so on.

And this year, there'd be none of that. Antares scowled as he tiptoed through the common room, partly at himself, and partly at the person he rightly felt was to blame – Snape. Since *Snape* was going to be home for Easter (probably because he would definitely have someone on hand to actually talk to – Spinner's End was even more of a depressing place to be in if you were a greasy antisocial git with no *friends*), Antares had grudgingly declined to go as well, citing studying and the fact that his friends would be at Hogwarts too. Because, though he had made some progress in Occlumency, what

with Quirrel and the book and everything, Antares knew very well that he'd be quite unable to stand up to someone as good at Legilimency as Snape for very long. For goodness' sake, even Professor Quirrel's less serious attempts could get his head hurting in a few minutes.

And there was yet another problem with this whole Cloak business. Antares, being paranoid, had read far ahead of Blaise and Tracey and actually practiced camouflaging his associations – a simple decision, really, as he had more to hide – and had said as little as possible to Quirrel about exactly why Snape had gone rummaging in his mind. The professor had taken it in stride, making a rather pathetic nervous joke about the whole thing as usual, but Antares couldn't help feeling that Quirrel tried to follow that particular association a lot more as time went on. And since the man didn't seem to be going anywhere for Easter like a normal person, Antares could just tell that the too-short holiday would be full of sessions like that, with Quirrel's nervous jokes and badly hidden curiosity about why Antares wanted Occlumency lessons in the first place.

Gritting his teeth, Antares shook his head. He really had to stop this habit of worrying over everything all the time – look how useless that had been when he'd been worrying about how to get the other Occlumency book out of the Restricted Section. And all that time wasted when Antares had simply begun to keep a sharp eye out for a way to blackmail Bletchley...

Well. He'd try to meditate now, anyway – clear his mind, and all that rot. Early hours, when no one was in the common room and Antares could recline on the softest sofa (usually occupied by one or two of the seventh years) and let his mind quiet down.

It took a while for the peaceful feeling to begin to seep into Antares' slightly aching head, but when it came, it spread fast, muting the itch of his irritated back and the stiffness of the arm that he'd slept badly on last night. And, for what felt like an age, Antares thought about simple things. The way the Cloak shifted around on him even now; the small creaks and sounds of Slytherin beginning to wake; the way his breath sounded ridiculously loud in the still room; all these things somehow sank into him and dulled the worry and fear that he still felt about the coming couple of weeks.

Too good to last? Possibly. Antares sighed as he finally let his concentration slide, knowing by the vague thumps and very muffled voices that people would soon be streaming out into the Common Room, and that the depression he was making in the wonderfully soft sofa wouldn't go unnoticed soon enough. He rose slowly, careful not to jerk at anything or make loud noises as he moved. Thoughts began to trickle back into Antares' head slowly – *I don't care what the book says, but doing it all at once is just painful and stupid* – as he moved through the Common Room, heading a little aimlessly for the exit. Rufus, still vaguely asleep, sniffed and muttered something about knowing someone was there, but didn't raise much of an alarm as Antares whispered the password and went outside, bracing himself for the cold of the corridor.

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Breakfast time passed in a bit of a blur, as Antares, bored of wandering the dungeons, had been forced to wait for someone convenient that wasn't paying much attention to things around them to open the door into the common room for him. After having to quell several sort-of-desperate plans to just rush by someone or chance being 'seen' opening the door, well, invisibly, Antares finally spotted a strangely cheery Flint lingering in the doorway and talking to someone. Giving fervent thanks to whatever god was looking down on him, Antares sidled up to the entrance as silently as possible, hardly hearing the odd phenomenon that was Marcus Flint laughing. He soon passed Flint and the pretty girl he was talking to or flirting with, and was inside his dorm with all speed immediately after that.

Working as quickly as he could without tripping over himself, Antares took stock of who wasn't in bed (everyone) and whose trunks were still present (only his, Blaise's and Ted's), while tidying his bed haphazardly and stuffing his already rather heavy robe pockets with things he didn't want to forget to take with him on his way to the library this morning. Then Antares practically ran into the shower, counting the minutes he probably had left before anyone came back to the dorms and saw him under his breath as he scrubbed and soaped and wrung out his wet hair. Then it was time to whip on his clothes and leave the dorm as sleepily and casually as possible, in case someone saw him.

Luckily enough, the common room was still quite empty, and only Flint noticed him on his way out, and didn't even really do much more than give him a sort of permissive nod before focusing his attention on the slightly pinkish girl he was still talking to. Antares sighed in relief and began to head upstairs with only half an eye out for where he was going.

That was, until he realised he was actually quite hungry, and mightn't be able to get anything to eat until lunch. Which was what...four, five hours away?

"Fuck," Antares said grimly, rolling his eyes at himself, at Draco, and at Crabbe and Goyle and at the whole stupid situation that had had him planning very cleverly to stay out of the way of the irritating threesome, and somehow forgetting to plan for something to eat while he was doing the clever staying out of the way.

For a long moment, Antares couldn't help hovering on the stairs that led up to the first floor and the Great Hall – would it really be so bad to go for breakfast? Yeah, Draco would be angry, and even angrier because Antares was avoiding him and his two *lackeys* so easily, but then Antares would worry about getting away from Draco and company on a full stomach. Which seemed, for an even longer moment, infinitely preferable to hanging around and languishing away in the library on an empty stomach. And if the library wasn't open – *Pince has to eat, too, doesn't she? Niffle me, I didn't think about this at all* – Antares would languish away in the drafty corridor in front of the library on an empty stomach.

Then, as Antares' stomach began to twinge insistently (familarly), he suddenly recalled how many times he'd gone without breakfast and dinner and still been fine. The recollection made him smile wryly – all this time in Hogwarts, and he *still* ended up starving, sort of. But the insistent growling of his stomach now didn't even resemble the hollow, clawing feeling Antares clearly remembered from not so long ago. There was really no excuse to be so silly about this, was there? So he might end up peckish and shivering in front of the library just this once – so what? At least, Antares now knew that he'd get lunch – a certainty that had, well, certainly been lacking during his truly hungry moments.

With a sigh and a half-smile, Antares began to climb again, not even pausing on the first floor landing. He'd just head for the library, then, and go down to lunch as early as possible. He'd be fine.

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The library opened just after breakfast ended – or, as Antares noted to himself with a sharp-edged inward grin, just after he'd been really starting to get hungry. Madame Pince bustled in and flung open the doors with a single-minded fervour that brought Antares' inward grin out into the open and roused him to his feet. After a stiff “Good Morning, Black!” from Pince and the obligatory suspicious once-over that usually went with any greeting from the crabby old woman, Antares began to drift steadily in the direction of the shelves that contained the most books on Charms. He got sidetracked as he scanned the shelves for the fifth year book he was looking for – *pass up a collection of defensive charms? Not likely* – but eventually retired to a table that was relatively out of the way to thumb through to the pages on Silencing –

*Right, that's it.* And, for the next hour or so, Antares could barely tear himself away from the book to do anything more than rummage hastily through his pockets for something to write on and write with. The history of the charms themselves was absolutely fascinating, as was the linkage of Silencing Charms to actual glamours and illusions. The book even vaguely referenced something that sounded a lot like Occlumency towards the end of the history bit about the charms, and as for the actual charms themselves... Antares sighed contentedly, muttering incantations experimentally under his breath, and trying to convince himself that the blatantly advanced spell might just work if he tried very, very hard –

“God, there he is!” Startled, Antares looked up, his grip tightening around his wand immediately as his eyes sought who had – oh, right.

“Where *were* you this morning?” Blaise said, coming up and flopping down beside him importantly. Tracey sidled around to the opposite side of the table and nicked one of the defensive charm collection books from the small pile Antares had been unable to stop himself from taking. “Your bed was empty and everything.”

“Really smart statement there, Blaise,” Tracey said absently, thumbing through the book she’d taken. “I mean, obviously, if you were asking the first question –”

“Shut it, all right?” Blaise retorted, a little louder than Tracey’s slightly smug tone probably deserved. “Can you just stop picking apart at my questions?”

“But it’s good exercise for you, Blaise,” Tracey said very seriously. Antares, rolling his eyes, mouthed in sync with the solemn statement Tracey added to that. “Questioning one’s questions is good for the mind.”

“If I hear you say that one more time –”

Tracey grinned, the book in her hands now forgotten. “ – you’ll pay Antares to hex me?”

Blaise spluttered in indignation. “Tracey, I wouldn’t pay anyone to do my dirty work!”

“Oh, so I’m dirty now, am I?”

“Stop it, you two,” Antares interjected, rolling his eyes again. “I don’t know if you find it fun having this same stupid conversation all over again, but –”

But Blaise’s attention was already drifting away, to land squarely on the page the fifth year charms book was still open at. “Is that the charm you were looking for?”

Antares bit back a grin. “Yes, Blaise.”

“No, Blaise, it’s a turnip,” Tracey said, her face straight and (Antares noted, amusedly) her eyes showing nothing but truthfulness, and the silly cross between conversation and competition only grew after that. Antares joined in wholeheartedly by declaring several times that he was fifteen, and Blaise lost his temper with Tracey’s irreverent and constant interruption of his own rather grand lies. It only ended when Pince passed (probably quite deliberately) by, and by then Antares was shoving aside his notes on the *Silencio* spell family and bending

over the rough timetable he and his friends were trying to create for the easy fulfilment of their homework, amusement and Occlumency needs. That went to pieces as soon as Blaise began to argue in favour of more Exploding Snap time than chess time, of course, but as Antares' hunger pangs had begun to cross the threshold, going from being only uncomfortable to being painful, it was quite fine that Tracey ended the argument by crossly declaring that she wanted to leave the library.

A shorter argument ensued, with Antares arguing long and hard for the kitchens (Tracey was always jabbering on about how her older brother raided the kitchen every hour or some such rot, and now just seemed a good time for her to prove her supposed knowledge of where its entrance was) and Blaise arguing for the common room. A compromise was soon declared, and, after a quick scramble for all the bits of written-on parchment that had fallen under the table, Antares, Blaise and Tracey were well on their way down to the dungeons.

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"Right, now if we just take that turn –"

"Face it, Tracey, we're sooo lost we probably won't be able to –"

"Is that the painting you were talking about?" Antares said hastily, cutting Blaise's slightly sulky statement off with a glare. Tracey glared at Blaise but nodded anyway, leading them closer with a slightly confident set to her shoulders as she boldly reached up and tickled the idly rocking pear in the gigantic bowl of fruit shown in the painting. It giggled, an oddly high-pitched sound, and somehow partially solidified into a door handle that Tracey wrenched quite carelessly at.

The smells and sounds of a kitchen hit Antares immediately as the painting swung out heavily from the wall, and he wasted no time in climbing in eagerly after a triumphant Tracey as she stumbled into the Hogwarts kitchens. Which, Antares thought, with widening eyes, were *huge* – full of house elves, which he'd half expected after all that appearing and disappearing food at meals (classic skill of well-trained house elves, Bella had told him once), all of them turning to stare at

him and his friends as they stood, a little awed by the clashing pots and pans and the sheer amount of noise and activity filling the place.

“What is you wanting?” one of the nearby ones demanded, and before Tracey could reply, Antares found himself asking a little plaintively (only a little) whether there was any breakfast left. The satisfaction that small statement spread unnerved Antares quite a bit – he’d seen the unstable Kreacher’s fawning behaviour over his mum and been taken aback at the pathetic eagerness with which the rather mad old house elf had taken orders to do the simplest (and, in Antares’ private opinion, most irritating) tasks. But that had been Kreacher, and had seemed like something the elf would do.

However, by the time tiny, uncomfortably direct hands had practically shoved Antares, Blaise and Tracey into seats on overturned pots and pans near the door and practically rained warm, comforting toast and bacon and eggs on them in large, partially empty serving dishes, Antares was in no mood to complain. He ate happily, letting Blaise and Tracey argue and chatter to the house elves to their content, and carried that warm, satisfied feeling right out into the corridor despite the smell of food clinging stubbornly to his badly dried hair.

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Three hours, one rather feeble lunch and almost fifteen rounds of Exploding Snap later, Antares gave the clock in the common room an idle glance and sighed. *Just gone two thirty – means I’ll have to be with Quirrel in a minute.*

“Antares, pay attention, will you? Tracey’s cheating again –”

“You’re a bad liar, Blaise – anyone ever tell you that?”

Gathering his slightly smoking cards together, Antares shrugged and gestured vaguely in the direction of the clock. “Sorry, guys – I have to go,” he said, sighing. “Lesson with – you know...”

Tracey’s eyes sparkled, as they usually did whenever she was winning a game by a landslide. “You-Know-Who? Why, Antares, I’d no idea you spoke with the dead –”



“Shut it,” Antares said, shaking his head a little fondly as Blaise calmly nicked a good portion of his old cards, eliciting a groan of irritation from Tracey.

“What? What? You’re cheating so much that I may as well just do it openly, Tracey.”

“Why are you always so touchy about snap, eh? You won the last five games, you know –”

Shaking his head, Antares stood up and began to beat a retreat, the sounds of the common room echoing a little in his ears as he retreated to his dorm to pick up his robes, which he’d shed in favour of more comfortable trousers and a ragged t-shirt – clothes that would never do for a formal-ish lesson with Quirrel. Tugging them roughly over his head, Antares also had a good rummage through his schoolbag for some of the parchment that listed spells that Quirrel had taught him – the professor had said something about wanting to put them all on a longer roll of parchment for easier reference, so...

Right, that seemed to be...yeah, that was it. Antares, after a brief stop at the table where the increasingly heated game between his two friends was going on, set off for Quirrel’s office with a tuneless whistle on the tip of his tongue and a somehow calm feeling from not having any real Apprentice duties during the holidays.

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Getting to the DADA classroom seemed to take no time at all – one minute, Antares was sort of ambling along and shivering slightly in the cool dungeons, and the next minute, he was roughly shouldering his way through the unlocked door of the classroom, only to find no one there. Rolling his eyes, Antares shut the door and flopped into one of the empty seats closest to the front of the empty class, humming vaguely under his breath and wondering where in the blazes Quirrel had got to. A quick look at the eerily quiet clock showed that he was just in time for the lesson, which the professor had set for about twenty to three. A bizarre time, in Antares’ opinion.

Then again, that was all in the spell family in comparison to the man’s usual behaviour. Antares had quickly realised even before Christmas that Quirrel’s stutter seemed compounded by the presence of Snape

and the heckling of some older students that seemed to be getting back at the poor man for some old grudge he'd started with them when he'd taught here a year or so ago. Antares still frankly couldn't understand why Snape – or anyone else, for that matter, would be afraid of Quirrel, or treat him badly. Of course, the Professor had his irritating habits, and Antares, having practiced with him throughout the autumn term, had even detected a strong streak of pride that ran far beneath the stutter – something that might have been much more apparent (and irritating) if Quirrel wasn't half as nervous as he was now. Although Antares did see, if a bit grudgingly sometimes, why Quirrel would be proud. He was really a fine teacher when he wasn't stuttering or endeavouring not to turn his head as if all the weight of the world was in or upon that disgusting turban (Antares, sniffing now, didn't think the smell would ever leave this room), and his eyes were just as sharp and quick to notice things as Snape's were.

For example, during their first lesson in the winter term, Quirrel had started asking Antares questions, mostly because he'd been late for that lesson despite the two notes Quirrel had had sent to him through two different second years, and also probably because Antares, still smarting from the confrontation with his friends and with the way Snape seemed to watch him all the time now, was quite sullen. They had been small questions, but always things about Snape, and about whether Antares was really comfortable in Slytherin – that sort of thing. Antares, then quite angry with his friends and Snape and even, to some extent, with the Cloak and the note and *all of it*, had vented, albeit as carefully as possible. Seeing how eagerly Quirrel seemed to soak up Antares' snide, bitter comments about Professor Snape, Antares had been quite happy to oblige him with tales of oppression and – as Antares had suddenly realised that his nervous tutor might be able to help him with the whole Occlumency thing – tales of the strong feeling that Snape could read minds. Tales that Quirrel's eyes had sharpened at and seemed to grasp immediately in a way that almost disturbed Antares.

At that point, Quirrel had dropped all pretence and begun to question Antares closely enough that his few newfound skills at evasion had been put to sore test. Carefully, slowly, Antares had built up a story of Snape finding him on Knockturn Alley (quite true in itself) and helping him into Hogwarts once Snape had seen how good Antares had been

at magic (also sort of true), complete with arguments and disagreements and Snape threatening Antares with the knowledge of things that he didn't remember ever saying out loud. It had been a close call, especially when Quirrel had asked about Bella and who she was and all that sort of thing. Close enough that Antares was still quite paranoid about not thinking about Bella's face or voice or *anything* during the extra lessons, just in case. Because, as Antares had rapidly found out, Quirrel was probably just as good a Legilimens as Snape was, and probably just as sneaky, if he wanted to be. Really, it hadn't taken more than an hour or so of noticing the sharp look in Quirrel's eyes for Antares to rapidly decide that just bringing the Cloak to the lessons would never be a good idea – he couldn't imagine what Quirrel would do with it once he found out about it and confiscated it, but find out and confiscate it he eventually would.

Anyway, the lessons had gone on, more frequently than before, and Antares had come to appreciate them a lot even when he left with an aching head and a conviction that he'd never, ever be as good at Occlumency as he needed to be. For not a day or two after their second or third lesson, Antares had been accosted out of nowhere by Granger while reading the more historical Occlumency book – *The Artes Wich Neede No Sighthe* – in the library, and had had to do some fast talking and fast cover-disguising to convince her that he was just doing some extra research on something for Potions. He'd almost been relieved when Snape had come upon them, but that relief had quickly disappeared when Snape strode off with the book, with *his* book, all because Granger didn't have the sense to lie that either her or Antares had a pass for the Restricted Section. Not that that would have worked, but still, that was a better lie than the one Granger had come up with – a guilty, plaintive-sounding jumble to do with her having 'found' the book lying around (which was actually part of the original lie that Antares had told her about the book in the first place) that had led the silly girl to demand that he release her of her debt to him as soon as Snape had disappeared with the book.

It hadn't taken more than a scornful look and a pointed statement or two about Granger's inability to save the book from Snape's clutches to stop her silly argument, but by then the book was well and truly gone, and the only thing Antares had had in return for his

studiousness in taking time to read about the history of Occlumency was a horribly insulting conversation with Snape.

Antares sighed. At least he'd made some headway into the scattered plans he'd made to get it back. It had been one of the driving forces pushing him into his uneasy truce with his friends (as he'd never gotten round to asking Tracey how much the books had cost), and had even been the main thing they'd talked about after the truce for all of two weeks. Wisely, neither Tracey nor Blaise had mentioned using the Cloak to get it, as such an undertaking would probably have included them in some way, which Antares had obviously not been prepared to do. Asking Pince or another teacher for help had been vetoed in the same way, for the obvious reason that they didn't want Snape to find out that they were reading books on Occlumency in the first place, and after a while, the only reasonable thing to do that remained was getting someone with a pass to the Restricted Section to find the book for them. That had come with its own problems, but it still seemed a better alternative to Antares than risking the Cloak or pretending to overcome his conviction not to let his friends use it, and it *had* borne fruit in the end, in the person of Miles Bletchely. Now, if the irritating sod would just agree to a time and date for the actual deed –

The door to the classroom opened, cutting short Antares' somewhat irritated train of thought. In stumbled Quirrel, his face deathly pale under the lurid purple of his turban. Antares rose immediately, feeling alarmed at the sight of his teacher as Quirrel, breathing hard, shut the door a little too violently.

"Sir? Is everything all right?" Antares asked, quietly, his wand already in his hand in case –

"Fine, j-just fine," snapped Quirrel, not even looking in his direction. Antares blinked, then sat down deliberately, not bothering to cast the only small strengthening spell he knew – one Bella had taught him and used on them both, many times. Anyone that snapped at him like that just for being nice didn't deserve that spell, in his opinion – not even Quirrel, who looked increasingly like he might have a good excuse for his horrid behaviour as he flopped into the high chair in front of his large desk.

Antares suppressed the desire to fidget in the tense silence, feeling unaccountably angrier by the second. *All I asked was if he was fine, for crying out loud – if he doesn't want to teach me this holiday, he can just bloody well say so instead of –*

"F-Forgive me, b-boy." Quirrel's tired sounding tone cut through Antares' irritated train of thought with no warning, causing him to look up from his slightly clenched hands, which he'd not even known he was staring at. "I – I'd f-forgotten our ap-p-ppointment, you see."

"And whose fault is that?" Antares found himself retorting hotly, despite the niggling feeling that he needed to stay calm. "I didn't steal the thought from your head – you certainly haven't taught me that. Not that I think it's possible anyway –"

"Isn't it?" Quirrel said, a small smile filtering onto his face. Antares paused, thinking hard – *well, I suppose Obliviation – er, Eradomency might do that. But –*

"Not from a distance," Antares said, shrugging. "And certainly not from me. And besides, if Professor Snape could do that, he wouldn't be bothering to teach here, would he?" At Quirrel's amused expression, Antares pressed on. "He'd be off somewhere, controlling the Minister of Magic or something, and rolling in money. He may be a ba- a horrible person, but he's not stupid."

"And w-what would *you* do w-with s-such a g-g-gift?"

Antares paused, now filtering through all the wild dreams he'd been entertaining of how much fun he'd get up to here once he'd gotten to the stage where Snape couldn't pick his brains like a can of sardines. But then, he supposed Quirrel didn't want to know about silly things like raiding the kitchens every week and stealing Draco's post for a year or so – "Go mad, probably," he said, before he could really think about it. Quirrel looked shocked, but Antares bravely went on – he'd read about something like that in the temporarily lost Occlumency book, anyway, so it wasn't as if it mightn't be right – "I wouldn't be able to trust my own mum, for crying out loud. Not that I trust her that much now, but if I could muck around with her mind like that, I'd know what she thought of me, wouldn't I? And anyway, if I had a really bad nightmare –" Antares paused for a moment, ruthlessly suppressing all

thoughts of the one he'd had last night – “ – and got panicked that someone was thinking about killing me or something, and I tried to wipe their memory in the dream, it could spill over, couldn't it?”

Quirrel gave him an oddly hard look. “Y-your d-dreams affect your magic?”

“No,” Antares said carefully, shrugging. “My mum's told me that really serious ones can, though.” *And she also told me never to talk to anyone about whether mine did or not – I definitely shouldn't have said that –*

“V-very knowledgeable, your m-mother,” Quirrel commented, rising slowly from his seat and taking out his wand with a slow deliberation that raised a sense of irrational fear in Antares. “Now, h-how about that l-lesson?”

“No theory today, sir?” Antares asked, his fingers straying hopefully back to his wand. Quirrel nodded firmly, and Antares stood up, excitement building in him as he waited for his teacher to tell him what they would be practicing today.

“Y-you f-forgot someone,” Quirrel said slowly instead, the colour starting to return to his pale face as he strode around the desk. “S-someone who might be able to e-erase m-minds as well...”

Antares, stepping out from behind his own little desk, wasn't sure he cared – he just wanted the duelling to start. His reply was a bit careless, but still hopefully polite. “Did I, sir?”

Quirrel nodded, coming to a stop just in front of the desk he'd just been sitting at. “The H-Headmaster.”

Antares' eyes widened a bit. “But he hasn't ever...well, I don't think he's ever...”

Quirrel shrugged. “He has the p-power, of course.”

“He wouldn't care, though,” Antares said, hope colouring his tone a bit more than he wanted it to. “And anyway, he doesn't know about these lessons, does he?”

“W-who can t-tell?” Quirrel replied, shrugging slightly again. And then his wand moved, if only slightly, signalling to Antares that their conversation was over – “*Tarantallegra!*”

“*Adimo*,” Antares half-shouted at the same time, getting ready to dodge the irritating hex if the deflecting spell didn’t – but it did, to an extent, tugging briefly at Quirrel’s wand so that the *Tarantallegra* went off course, and Antares had a moment to fire off a Stinging Hex as strongly as he could, aiming for his teacher’s wand arm. Quirrel flinched, bringing a bit of a silly grin to Antares’ face, as it was rare even now that his hexes reached Quirrel, let alone had any effect on him.

“Nicely done,” Quirrel said, blocking the Leg-Locker Curse Antares sent at him next with a rather negligent wave of his wand. “Don’t attack or try to block for a few minutes – practice the *Adimo* instead –”

Antares did, and poured as much of his concentration as he could into dodging and trying the Deflection Hex again and again, but every time he moved, Quirrel seemed to be incanting something else, and all his cries of “*Adimo!*” were for nothing. Just as things were beginning to blur a bit behind the sheer determination to get the spell right again, just once, Antares suddenly felt a flicker in the back of his head, as if –

As if someone was trying to get into his head, or was already in his mind, somehow.

*He’s cheating, the bastard*, Antares thought, furiously, around the unpleasant shock of the Stinging Hex that had just hit him when he paused in surprise. Not bothering to look in Quirrel’s direction, he thought hard of darting behind one of the desks to use it as a shield even as he went the other way, and the red beam of the Disarming Charm flashed at that desk, sliding it back along the stone floor a little way. Eyes narrowing slightly, Antares began to do the same thing over and over again, thinking out small strategies and points and not using them even as he carefully examined his mind for where that irritating flicker was coming from. A few minutes later, Antares was starting to have a headache, and Quirrel seemed to be starting to

catch on to his strategy, and he was no nearer to finding the specific part of his mind that Quirrel was watching or looking into, and Antares abruptly decided it was time for something else.

*“Mordeo,”* he hissed, relishing the look of surprise on Quirrel’s face as the hex hit him.

“I said d-deflect, not attack,” Quirrel said, sounding amused as he casually fired off a Stinging Hex that almost made Antares drop his wand. It couldn’t have been a coincidence that the flicker grew into a nagging throb, or that Antares suddenly found himself thinking of Snape momentarily again. “D-Don’t just s-stand there – d-do it. *Mordeo!*”

The second Stinging Hex made Antares catch his breath, but only for a moment. Two could play at this stupid, invasive game – *“Adimo!”* Antares shouted, even before Quirrel could mouth the next spell, and then, as Quirrel’s wand almost whipped out of his hand with the force of the spell – *“Legilimens –”*

Quirrel stared at him in shock, and for a minute, the whispered spell, sliding over the confusing, incomprehensible surface thoughts in the man’s mind, took firm hold of a wriggling, tiny thread of association – something obscure and somehow to do with the weight of the turban – and tugged –

*“Finite!”*

Antares staggered back, his head swimming from the sheer force with which the association had been wrenched from his curious mind. The expression on Quirrel’s face was angry, but overlain with a strange, intense look that Antares didn’t understand and, seeing the abrupt way Quirrel lowered his wand, suddenly didn’t want to understand. “W-what was that?”

“You started it,” Antares said, nervously, angrily. “You didn’t say you were going to try to look into my head –”

“It was p-p-part of y-your practice,” Quirrel said, almost spitting the words out, looking like he was struggling with something. “Y-you should b-be able to d-def-fend your mind d-during a duel...” But



Antares, though he lowered his wand, didn't think for a second that that was just it. Quirrel had asked and asked and asked him about Snape, despite seeming to know more about the man than Antares did – it didn't make sense that Snape's ugly, angry face would be the first thing he went for while prowling around on the surface of Antares' thoughts. Unless he thought that it led to something else that he wanted to know – something else Antares had evaded questions and more questions about ever since the start of the winter term – “Are y-you l-listening?”

“If you want to know something, you should ask,” Antares said, trying to sound more injured than he really felt. Right now, with the way his head was starting to ache, he could only think of a couple of things Quirrel could want to know about him very badly – his mother, and his blood status, which Antares had heartily avoided talking about, just in case Quirrel was the sort of person who would care. Could he afford to give up the latter so that the nosy bastard would just – wait. *Wait*. Antares looked down almost in reflex as the thought of silver folds ran through his mind – perhaps Quirrel had gotten tired of not knowing exactly why Antares wanted Occlumency. If it was about *that* –

“Where d-d-did you learn th-that spell?” Quirrel said, suddenly, placing his wand on the desk in front of Antares – the one he'd shoved about with a Disarming Charm, incidentally – and staring down at him, a very serious look on his face.

Antares snorted despite the panic starting to well up in him, hardly believing his ears. “I don't think you know who you're teaching, Professor.” He looked up then, deliberately, having sunk all thoughts of silver and the Cloak into a morass of vague longings for money and wealth, and saw that Quirrel's expression was only growing more hostile, more affronted. “Did you think I wouldn't even *try* to find out more about what Snape was doing to me?”

“You d-did not ask me,” Quirrel said, eyes narrowing. “Why?”

“The same reason you didn't ask me what you wanted to know just now, I should think,” Antares said with a sinking feeling, trying hard to keep his frustration out of his fairly level answer. He realised, now, that he probably should have, to make everything look more natural –

then again, he'd known even before he'd thought to see if Quirrel knew about Occlumency, and had needed to know to learn with Blaise and Tracey, in any case. Next time – "Ow," Antares couldn't help from exclaiming, then. *Oh, just great, my burns are bloody itching again*, he thought, fidgeting and trying to look at Quirrel's ear instead of his eyes as inconspicuously as possible. For some reason, his burns seemed to flare up a lot more often now, and were horrible to live with after a hard session of Occlumency with Quirrel and –

"W-where did you f-find the spell?"

"Books in the library," Antares said negligently, starting to feel very itchy and impatient, not to mention unnerved by the overly serious way Quirrel was taking this. It wasn't like he'd even seen anything in the irritating man's mind, was it? "Anyone can find them if they look hard enough –"

Quirrel leaned forward a little, a move that might have been menacing if not for the way his turban was beginning to slip precariously over one ear. "Anyone, you s-say – in-including your f-friends?"

"Excuse me?" Antares said, blinking hard, his heart suddenly thudding faster than normal. *I never said – oh. Thank Merlin, I can get out of this...* "I don't remember saying that, for some reason," he continued, shifting into the tone in which he'd previously expressed his conviction that Snape was doing something odd to him.

But Quirrel didn't seem to be listening or even preparing to go after the thoughts of Antares' friends learning Occlumency with him – the thoughts Antares was now layering in longing and uncertainty and firmly attaching to the thread of association that linked almost all of his dreams together. "I-I-I believe I t-told you to k-keep this s-secret," Quirrel was saying, instead, now pacing a little in front of his desk and looking a little wild about the eyes, as if he believed that Antares had somehow been tricking him or been conducting large meetings of students wanting to learn Occlumency, or was somehow in league with Snape.

As Quirrel continued to mutter about secrets and Antares not being discreet, his expression began to layer over with panic, and his eyes drift far away, perhaps remembering one of those whispered,

accusing conversations Antares had spotted him having with Snape in the courtyard at least three times. In any other situation, Antares might have pitied him – after all, goodness knew what Snape might do to Quirrel if he found out about the continued lessons. But now, his back itching fiercely, almost in time with his aching head and slightly throbbing knee (which Antares had banged on a desk while dodging under the influence of a horribly persistent Jelly-Legs), Antares could do nothing but lift his chin and seek, calmly and defiantly, to draw the line. Quirrel seemed to have forgotten very conveniently that what he was teaching Antares was illegal without an appropriate instructing license, and that the way he was teaching Antares was even more so, as Antares was underage. It was time he remembered.

“I really don’t know where all these strange suggestions are coming from, sir,” he said deliberately, watching the colour drain out from the pale professor’s face as he spoke with great satisfaction. “I didn’t say anything about my friends – I remember telling you how I found out about the incantation, but –”

“I – I suppose y-you’re r-right,” Quirrel faltered, obviously restraining himself from saying anything else. Antares shrugged slowly, restraining a slightly vicious grin as he realised he’d just said that much in the same way he’d told his tales of mind-raping woe to the professor months ago. “I d-don’t know how I’ve b-become so p-paranoid.”

“Neither do I,” Antares said. After a moment’s pause, he couldn’t help adding, as innocently as possible, that “The way Professor Snape’s been bothering both of us recently – maybe it’s all rubbed off on you?”

Quirrel laughed shakily, fakely. “I-Indeed – Severus c-can be m-most persistent.”

“Yeah,” Antares said, not missing the sharp look that Quirrel sent his way as he said so, shrugging. The clock behind the professor’s desk chimed softly, and Antares’ eyes widened a bit as he spotted the time – it was almost four o’clock, and nearly time for tea. “Wow, look at the time – should I go?”

Quirrel stared at him for a long, uncomfortable moment, then nodded, turning away and heading for the large desk. Antares heading slowly for the door, remembered briefly that the professor had said something about giving Antares a complete list of all the spells Quirrel had taught him since the beginning of the year. But, risking a quick look and slightly fake smile back at Quirrel, he decided not to chance mentioning –

“W-wait, boy,” Quirrel said, then, stopping him in his tracks. Antares felt the strange urge to see if the door wasn’t locked before he turned his back on it to return to his teacher’s desk, but he suppressed the feeling somehow, walking quickly and trying to look unconcerned as he approached the desk, which now had a neatly bound roll of parchment in it. “There – I-I took the l-liberty of a-a-adding some extra, f-for your s-study.” Quirrel picked up the scroll and leaned forward, almost shoving it into Antares’ hands.

Antares gritted his teeth at the sharp pain of a slight cut where the ridiculously sharp-edged parchment had dug into his hand, and carefully extracted the slightly crumpled, older pieces of parchment that Quirrel had given him earlier on so that they wouldn’t squash the fresh roll. Tucking it into the now nearly empty pocket, he briefly examined the slightly bleeding cut, ignoring Quirrel’s stammered apologies.

“...s-sometimes m-my trimming sp-spells are too good,” he was saying now. Antares nodded, mumbling a somewhat irritated ‘yes, sir’ as he turned away, but not before Quirrel’s anxious tone could catch his attention and stop him in his tracks again. “Y-you won’t b-be needing those anymore, w-will you?” Quirrel said, standing up slowly. “Here – m-might as well let me d-dispose of them –”

“I have notes on them,” Antares said almost immediately, looking down at the crumpled sheets, almost able to hear Bella’s voice telling him never to give away things he wrote on to strange people. After all Quirrel had done today, Antares was strongly inclined to count him as one of those – “Can I keep the ones I put notes on, or...?”

“B-but of c-course,” Quirrel said, pausing in front of him, the expression on his face a little too curious for Antares’ taste. Antares,

who had just started leafing through them to see if any were not written on, suddenly saw that out of the bottom two pieces, which he knew were clear of notes, one had a tiny smear on one side that was already darkening and drying – his blood, the little that had come out of the cut. “Ah, th-that one –”

“It’s got notes on the back,” Antares insisted, not bothering to turn either of them over in that direction as he folded all of the notes together. There was no way, no way he was letting that bit of parchment out of his sight, not with any of his blood on it –

“I don’t s-see any –”

“On the back,” Antares repeated, squeezing and roughly stuffing the notes into his trouser pocket, more so he could easily reach his wand than anything else. The way that that roll of parchment had cut him just enough that he bled a little on that last bit of parchment was far too much of a coincidence – “I’d better go, Professor.”

“True,” Quirrel said, his eyes strangely hard. Not wasting a moment, Antares headed for the door, his heart beating faster than it had a right to as Quirrel called out again. “S-sure you c-can meet next week? My schedule will be –”

“Can’t,” Antares said, firmly, a sickly sort of relief piercing him as the door opened under his slightly shaking hand. “I’ve got some essays and everything.”

“Pity,” Quirrel said quietly. Antares nodded quickly and fled, trying to keep himself from running outright until he was well out of sight of Quirrel’s office. By the time he’d reached the dungeons, he was breathing hard and trying to think about why on earth the way Quirrel had been looking at him at the last had panicked him so much. He still had no definite answer as he walked into the Common Room, feeling dazed and still a little out of breath as he headed quietly for Blaise and Tracey, who were now arguing over a rather violent-looking game of chess.

Blaise noticed him first, being the type of person that never paid much attention to his game unless he was losing – which, as Antares

saw on his approach, he certainly wasn't. "Hey, Antares – what took you so long?"

"Everyone else's already gone for tea," Tracey said crossly, looking up from her avid perusal of the board between her and Blaise with a scowl. "Wait – are you –"

"No, I'm not all right," Antares said, flopping down into a chair not far from them. "Is there anyone in our dorm, Blaise?"

"Don't think so," was the cautious answer. Without another word, Antares struggled to his feet and headed for the corridor that led to the dormitories, ignoring Blaise's irritated exclamation as he left. As he'd hoped, they both followed him into his and Blaise's dorm, and gave him surprised looks as he shut the door and locked it after a cursory check of Ted's thankfully empty bed.

"Sorry, but I couldn't chance someone hearing us out there," Antares said, sighing as he sat down wearily on his bed.

"But there isn't anyone –"

"Someone could have come in," Antares insisted, digging out the crumpled notes from his pocket as well as reaching into his robes for the roll of parchment, which was still pristine. "Feel the edges on this, go on –"

Blaise yelped as it was thrust into his hand. "Ow! Antares, is this some kind of sick joke?"

"Quirrel just did that to me," Antares said, ignoring the angry look Blaise was giving him as he nursed his hand, having eagerly given up the roll to Tracey's careful, curious hands. "Did it cut you?"

"Almost – what were you thinking?"

"Quirrel did that – shoved it into my hands at the end of the lesson, and *then* –" Antares dug out the bloodstained bit of parchment with some difficulty – " – he tried to get me to give him this, so he could 'dispose of it'."

“Antares, I don’t see –”

“Tracey, it’s got my blood on it! Look, there, on the side –”

Blaise grabbed Antares’ shoulder as he practically thrust the parchment in Tracey’s face, shaking him firmly. “Calm down, for crying out –”

“But is it just me, or isn’t that fucking fishy?” Antares said easily wrenching loose of Blaise’s grip. “And god, the *lesson* –”

“Maybe you should start from there,” Tracey said, tartly, and Antares, sighing in equal parts frustration and relief, did so.

Silence hung in the air after he finished – a nervous, tense silence that Antares could not bear. “I’m not being stupid about this, all right? He was –”

“We know, Antares,” Blaise said, almost gently. “You’re right, Quirrel was acting really weird.”

“Yeah,” Tracey said, a little lamely. She was still staring down at the bloodstained bit of parchment and turning it over in her hands, the expression on her face one of fear and disbelief.

Antares drew in a deep breath, and finally made himself say what he’d been thinking all the way down to this dungeon, all the way into this room, all throughout this conversation. “I’m not going back. I’m not doing those lessons any more.”

“Antares –”

“Snape was right,” Antares said, not heeding the alarm in Blaise’s voice, “He was *right*, Blaise – there’s something off. I don’t know what it is, but it’s off, it’s wrong, and I’m not going to be alone with that stupid bastard and his stupid turban again if I can help it.”

“But what about the spells, and the Occlumency?”

“I’m not an idiot, I can study spells on my own,” Antares shot back hotly. “And you two are doing just fine without him, aren’t you? I get

the worst headaches after Occlumency now, don't I? I get to have my back feeling like it's on fucking fire after every fucking lesson with that —

"Antares, even if Quirrel is a bit twisted, he wouldn't make your burns itch like that on purpose," Tracey tried to say. "I mean, he doesn't even know you have them, does he?"

"If the way he just snuck into my mind back there is any indication, I don't think I can say," Antares said, his shoulders sagging even more. "I *hate* him — you don't know what it felt like, just being cheated against like that —"

"Wait, you think he tried to collect your blood for some reason, and you're angry because he cheated at a duel?"

"It was the way he did it," Antares said sullenly, scowling as he scooted back further onto his bed. "If he wanted to cheat, he should've just blocked me or something — I'm not *that* good. Not like I was hurting him, or anything, was it?"

"You said he flinched at that Stinging Hex, though," Blaise pointed out, unhelpfully.

"I can count on one hand how many times I actually hit him with something in that duel, Blaise, for goodness' sake —"

"We're starting to run in circles, you two," Tracey said firmly. "The real question is what Antares is going to do —"

"I'm not doing anything, all right? I'm not going back!"

"I didn't say you were going to!" Tracey half-shouted back, her face reddening with frustration. "I'm just asking how you think you're going to keep away from Quirrel when you're an Apprentice, and you have to —"

"Snape," Blaise suddenly said, quietly. Tracey glared at him, but he gave back as good as he got. "If Antares tells Snape —"



Antares' mouth fell open. "If Antares does what? Blaise, you're joking!"

"Snape'll know how to deal with it," Blaise said, determinedly, ignoring the hard look Tracey was giving him. "Quirrel's still afraid of him, isn't he?"

Antares opened his mouth to retort to that, but stopped, remembering the wild look in Quirrel's eyes as he'd paced and muttered about being betrayed. It was actually a quite a good idea, if he could pull it off.

No, scratch that. It was a *brilliant* idea, as it would make sure Snape trusted him more and might therefore even leave off the watching, narrowed eyes and the frequent piercing searches of Antares' mind. It could work. It *would* work.

"Look at him," Blaise was saying, lowly, in an amused sort of tone. "See the wheels turning around in his head –"

"Shut up, Blaise," Antares said automatically, but he already knew what he was going to do, as soon as the Easter hols were over – as soon as Snape came back. "I'll do it, all right?"

"I knew you'd see it my way," Blaise said, smugly, and it was all Antares could do not to smile. Despite the ache in his head and the fading itch between his shoulders, everything would be fine.

At least, he hoped so. Thankfully, he had all the rest of the holiday to prepare a good story, and to drill it into his head and into the web of associations that now clung to the thought of Quirrel's name.

Antares smiled, then, determinedly. Everything was going to be all right.

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*A/N: Well, well, well. That was an exciting write – hope it was a good read, y'all. In the next chapter (Chapter 19: Murky Doings), I sort of get back on the canon road, wink wink, nudge nudge.*

*Oh, and if I manage to finish AST year 1 before I go on a brief summer hiatus? I might just give you my in-chapter writing notes for chapters 17 to 21, as well as a nice fat excerpt from one of Antares' Occlumency books – the history-ish one. Comment with your opinion, plz, and see you next week!*

## **Chapter 19: Murky Doings**

For what must have been the hundredth time since his last lesson with Quirrel, Antares thanked God, Morgana, and whatever saint would listen for his decision to avoid the man. Yes, the decision had put him, Blaise and Tracey on tenterhooks for the twelve or so days left of the Easter holiday, and yes, Antares' conversation with Snape on his return from Spinner's End had not been very pleasant, but Antares could not but feel a fervent sense of gratefulness that he'd seen the light when he had.

Because, after his last lesson with Quirrel, the man's behaviour had taken a turn for the worse. That fucking turban had been present at every meal during Easter, and continued to be present at nearly every meal since then, causing Antares no little trouble in avoiding Quirrel whenever he could. Until Snape had finally deemed it prudent to have a chat with Quirrel, Antares had rushed through every breakfast, lunch and dinner in an effort to get out of the Great Hall before his former tutor. Blaise and Tracey had been forced to do the same after being cornered by Quirrel once or twice at breakfast, and, once Draco returned, he wasted no time in poking malicious fun at the three of them.

"Rushing off for another odd job, Black?" Draco would say, smirking, even as Antares tried to eat quickly and not look like he was openly keeping an eye on Quirrel at the same time. "Not enough hours in the day to pay your way here, I suppose..."

Antares, of course, had known better than to bother retaliating. He'd never realised how much food you could stuff down in the time it took to prepare and deliver a really nasty comeback, and as he knew very well that time wasted at lunch would mean that he'd have to run and hide that much faster to make sure Quirrel couldn't get a hold of him during his lunch break. Carrying his Cloak had become less of a habit and more of a necessity, as it was beyond useful in a pinch, especially if Antares was tired or his back was itching hard enough to distract him – ducking into a classroom and sweeping on the Cloak usually served just as well as a complicated route down to Slytherin and into the common room.

*Or so I thought.*

Maybe it was the fact that Quirrel had started missing meals like he'd used to. Or maybe it was the knowledge that Snape had given the weird bastard a talking-to. All Antares knew was that he'd made some kind of mistake, and was about to be caught, all because of frigging *Flitwick* and his stupid Charms project –

Someone shuffled in the corridor outside the classroom, and Antares went still, clutching the silver folds of the Cloak tighter around him. He tried to seize hold of his growing panic, tried to soothe the fear that was squeezing coldly at his heart. Tried and failed – that was a footstep, he could tell. Antares bit his lip and gave up, hoping somewhat futilely that Quirrel wasn't looking out for stray emotions or something crazy in that vein. Why hadn't he been faster this time? He'd *seen* Quirrel in the staff room when he'd entered; it wasn't like he hadn't –

"Why, Quirinius! Fancy spotting you here –"

...and Antares could breathe again. Snape, thank *god* –

"S-simply taking a s-stroll, S-Severus –"

"Allow me to accompany you, then," Snape said, his bizarrely courteous tone underlain with a hint of steel. Quirrel laughed nervously, and – that sounded like they were going away – *oh god, I hope so* –

The silence seemed to ring in Antares' ears as he waited for one minute, then two, then three, just in case. He didn't intend to waste his lucky chance by being impatient, but neither did he want to stay here for long enough that he missed the meeting with Adrian and Charles – part of the real reason for his being up here at all. Antares fidgeted under the Cloak, and finally decided to take it off and put it away – if he was caught now, it would be better to have it out of sight anyway. Not that it would be seen straightaway in the first place, but Antares knew well enough that Quirrel was good enough at Legilimency to sense someone's presence in a room – if he'd been caught, it would only have been a locking spell and a few minutes before he'd been spotted and seized.

A door shut somewhere, the sound seeming to come from far away, and Antares realised that it might be the door of the staff room. No sense in waiting any longer...and Morgana, he was right, the corridor was empty, and he could finally leave. Antares' sigh of relief sounded too loud in the relative silence around him, but he couldn't bring himself to care. Checking quickly that a corner of the Cloak wasn't sticking out of his robe pocket, Antares set off immediately for the less-used stairs to the dungeons.

It seemed to take ages to make his way past all the empty classrooms and struggle down the slightly crumbling stone staircase, but Antares felt a lot better on opening the heavy wooden door at the foot of the stairs and slipping through into the dungeons. One thing that had given him and his friends great comfort during Easter was the fact that, other than the Slytherins and some of the Hufflepuffs, no one really used the many empty dungeon rooms apart from Snape and Filch, who, according to legend, still kept a small, stifling room down here filled with torture tools of all sorts. So Antares, Blaise and Tracey had been able to vanish into the dungeons for hours on end and count on Quirrel not being able to find them. They'd explored the dungeons closest to Slytherin out of boredom, and had even found one or two that seemed to be worn-down former dormitories with closed-off connections to some unknown room in Slytherin.

The memory of that day brought a small smile to Antares' face as he moved briskly through the long, cool corridor, counting off as he went along – Tracey had insisted they cut a hole in the door and search for it from inside Slytherin at night, and Blaise had argued that whoever wanted to close it off would have made sure that no one could find it again from inside Slytherin, and the resulting fight had been one of the most entertaining ones Antares had witnessed between the two of them.

*Wait – was that the fifth door on the right I just passed, or the sixth?*

Berating himself for not paying attention to what he'd just been trying to do, Antares tried the door in front of him, first poking carefully at the heavy handle with his wand before trying to shove it open – it didn't budge, and when Antares put a careful ear to the door, no sound came through. Of course, that might not mean anything other

than the fact that Adrian or Charles knew how to do a Silencing Charm (Antares scowled – it really wasn't fair that that charm was so bloody advanced. He *needed* it, for crying out loud), or something close.

Still, there was no point hanging around a silent door, so Antares quickly retraced his steps and found, to his relief, that the door he'd passed by mistake was actually ajar. The muted sounds of a relatively calm Quidditch discussion hit Antares' ears as he shouldered his way into the room, which, he noted in slight shock, was really rather large. The two arguing boys were seated on two of the many dusty wooden chairs in the far corner of the room, and even as Antares closed the door and walked toward them, Charles stood up and began to sketch out a rough, chalky map on the stone floor with his wand, talking animatedly all the while.

"Hey, Adrian," Antares tried. Adrian jumped, twisting round in his chair to stare at Antares as he came closer. "I'm not late, am I?"

Charles looked up then, and gave Antares a quick nod while reaching forward to poke Adrian in the head. "Don't look so bloody frightened, Adrian – does he look like Boily Bole to you?"

"Fuck off," Adrian said, sounding disgruntled as he tried to brush the chalk out of his hair. "I'm still not sure I see the point in asking him to do what we can't –"

"Still don't see the point? You didn't even hear him come in, you stupid –"

"That doesn't mean he did it," Adrian said, loudly. "Did you, Antares?"

Antares only just stopped himself from rolling his eyes, settling instead for a slightly insolent look and the calm extraction of a small Gringotts-embossed bag from his trouser pocket. Adrian stared as Charles accepted the bag eagerly, untying it with relish as Antares shrugged his shoulders and tried not to look too pleased with himself.

"They're not all here," Charles said, after rifling rapidly through the coins in the bag.

“And? You said he was flashing it around – spending it, eh?” Antares said, keeping his expression mild despite Adrian’s accusing look. “We had an agreement, yeah, but that map isn’t worth getting knocked about for looking through Bole’s pockets, and you know that just as well as I do.”

Looking outraged, Adrian opened his mouth to protest. But – “Forget it, Adrian,” Charles said, cutting him off, “Even if he swiped some of it, we can’t prove it. Unless you feel like taking it up with the Boily when he finds out...?”

“Shut up gloating, you pig,” Adrian said, casting Antares a look of grudging admiration as he regained his seat. “But Black, that’s the last time you cheat us, understand? It took us two years to get the maps of the library correct, so –”

“I understand,” Antares said, carefully. Adrian sighed, now fishing about in his pockets for said map, and Charles gave Antares an oddly approving grin and began to rub out the chalky Quidditch play on the floor. “Wait, don’t – isn’t that the Chaser’s movement from the Ravenclaw game last weekend?”

“Yeah, actually – I still think they shouldn’t have bothered with it against Hufflepuff. Anything more complicated than a Side-Swiper’s completely wasted on that lot.”

Adrian bristled, momentarily forgetting to hand Antares the roughly folded piece of parchment as he turned to face his smirking friend. “Oh, shut up, Charles, they’re better than that –”

But Charles simply rolled his eyes. “Yeah, what would you know? When they play, the only person you’re watching’s Minnie Moon, anyway. Eh, Antares?” As Adrian spluttered and turned a telling red, Charles snatched the map from his hands and moved past him to hand it to Antares. “We’re done here, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Antares answered absently, his attention already half on the surprisingly neat map of the Restricted Section, complete with section titles and arrows pencilled in on the shelves Adrian thought were most likely to have the copies of *Ars Decoctum* that Antares would need to look through and test. “This is really good, by the way.”

“Better be,” Adrian said, morosely, still quite pink. “My dad’s in mapmaking for Gringotts and all that – he’s really mad about me practicing it regularly and everything –”

“Mapmaking? For *Gringotts*?”

“Blame my dad’s lack of direction,” Adrian replied, his tone a little dark, “You know, second son syndrome – he went looking in the Pucey annals and found out we were mapmakers something like a century ago, and that was that.”

“But isn’t he doing it for Gringotts? It sounds really interesting, so –”

“Trust me,” Adrian said, darkly, “It isn’t.”

Charles snorted. “I’d leave now if I were you – any longer, and he’ll actually tell you why. In really detailed detail, if you catch my meaning.”

Antares grinned slightly, tucking away the map. “I’d better take your advice, then. See you later, Adrian.”

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An hour or so later, Antares tore himself away from the map and the various notes he’d made concerning his still slightly sketchy plan to retrieve *The Artes Wich Neede No Sichte* from the library – a plan he’d been forced to revise because of Miles Bletchley’s defection (after Easter, the asshole had stopped using the dungeon he’d been originally using to practice Beating indoors and had refused to even look at Antares since) and, an hour and a half ago, Flitwick’s refusal to allow Antares a pass to the Restricted Section for research for his stupid Charms project. Now, as Antares rose and stretched his aching legs, the only sensible thing to do was to use the map he’d gotten from Adrian and Charles to sneak into the Section at the night, under cover of the Cloak.

Sighing, Antares dipped his hand into the robe pocket containing the Cloak, fingering it possessively. He didn’t like the idea of risking the Cloak for even something as important as getting the book back, but there wasn’t really much else Antares could think to do at this point. So far, he’d tried (and failed) to blackmail Bletchley into getting the



book for him, as well as argued uselessly for a pass to the Restricted Section so he could research the advanced and less legal versions of the Charm family he was supposed to be studying (Locomotion Charms, which he despaired of ever writing about properly because of the massive branches of spells that fell under the family). It was really about time he got the book back, anyway – wasn't it something like a month and a half till the end of term?

Antares, rubbing at his slightly protesting stomach, decided that he could worry about it later. Dinner had probably begun while he was plotting the right approach to the shelves he needed to search, and he was hungry.

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It was really quite a shock to walk into the half-empty hall and realise that Quirrel wasn't at the staff table. Antares only just stopped himself from gaping by biting his lip, but copped a malicious comment and a round of sniggers from the older end of the Ravenclaw table as he couldn't help pausing to look. Somehow, Antares got himself to move again, heading automatically for the free space between Tracey and Blaise while trying not to think of how easily he might have met Quirrel on his way to the Great Hall.

"Where've you been?" Blaise demanded as Antares sat down, and it was an awkward moment before he could remember what he was supposed to say to indicate success at getting hold of the map.

"Library," Antares said, shrugging.

"You shouldn't have bothered asking, Zabini," Draco said maliciously, from nearby. "Isn't it his second home, now? Oh, wait; he doesn't *have* a first home –"

"Shut it," Antares started to say, fiercely, but Blaise cut him off.

"Antares," he said in a loud, exaggerated tone, "will you be my friend?" Draco's eyes widened slightly at that, and reddened when both Tracey and Antares hid their laughter behind badly faked coughs. "Antares, I'm serious here –"

"Black, you absolute little shit –"

Tracey gasped dramatically. "Draco, language!"

"Do either of you mind?" Blaise said, sounding highly affronted. "I'm trying to carry on a serious conversation here!"

Draco, scowling horribly, leapt up from his seat on the bench and began shoving his way over to Antares, wand in hand. "You'll pay for that, Black, I swear –"

"Put that away before you hurt yourself," Antares said viciously, taking great delight in the way Draco flushed at the contemptuous words. "I mean it, Draco; you'll have someone's eye out –"

"Well, I hope it's yours!"

Antares pretended to perk up. "Does that mean you're challenging me to a duel?"

Draco sputtered for a moment, then drew himself up, glaring down his pointy nose at Antares as he went on to say, "I don't duel with scum, thank you."

"Not going to chastise him for talking back to his betters, Malfoy?" someone said from farther down the Slytherin table. "Oh go on, let's see it –"

But Antares could feel Snape's narrowed eyes boring a hole in the back of his head, and knew to just end his involvement in the whole silly scene with an insolent smile and turn back to his meal, nudging at Blaise and Tracey to do the same. When Draco stormed off, Tracey put down her cutlery and had a proper, quiet giggle, and Blaise whispered his request to please really be friends, and Antares couldn't help but set down his own fork and knife and do the same.

After that, conversation on their end of the Slytherin table was stilted, with Pansy glaring meaningfully at Antares and Blaise and Vince giving them threatening looks as Greg put away a roll or two for their dearly departed leader. Antares ignored it as best as he could, keeping a lazy eye on the double doors of the Hall as he steadily went through as much roast chicken as he possibly could. This was

one of the least rushed meals he'd had for three weeks, and he intended to make the most of –

“Leave me alone, Neville!” Granger’s frenzied whisper, which was loud enough that probably the whole Hall could hear it, cut through Antares’ one-sided thoughts. “I’ve told you a million times –”

But, by then, Granger was shouldering fiercely through the double doors, Neville Lupin in hot (and probably angry) pursuit, and to the chagrin of probably the entire Slytherin and Ravenclaw tables, the conversation could no longer be heard. Whispered, laughing speculation replaced the slight lull that the loud whispers had caused, and Antares reddened slightly when he realised something like half of the Ravenclaw first years were staring in his direction.

“Oh, stop that,” Tracey said, nudging him carelessly. “It’s your own fault for telling the little idiot anything in the first place.”

“I didn’t tell her anything,” Antares muttered, poking irritably at his chicken, avoiding the meaningful look Blaise was directing towards him. “All I said was –”

“You shouldn’t have bothered talking to her in the first place, and you know it,” Blaise said, cutting through Antares’ hesitant words, and for once, he didn’t feel inclined to argue. Antares sighed, slotting another piece of chicken into his mouth as he mulled over the whole sorry issue. First, there had been that stupid Nicholas Flamel thing in the library – Antares well remembered how devious he’d felt, tricking Granger into owing him a favour. That had been followed by her irritating attempts to cancel it out, and despite Antares’ pointed comments and prolonged hours of ignoring her in lessons, Granger had kept on bugging him.

Things had taken somewhat of a turn for the worse when she started palling around with Lupin and Weasley. Granger had obviously cried off to them about him or something, and then *they’d* started hinting clumsily that he’d be in trouble if he continued to withhold the fulfilment of her debt to him. But even that was preferable to the strange behaviour the three of them had begun to exhibit, even before the Easter holidays had begun. Somehow, they’d gotten it into their heads that Snape was trying to do something illegal.

Antares sighed, finally laying down his cutlery. As much as he himself distrusted Professor Snape, that was just – just *ridiculous*, and he'd told Granger so, as many times as she'd asked him for help in (of all things) spying on the man to see if he was trying to do something wrong. Snape took great pleasure in rules in most circumstances, except for when he was favouring Slytherin House – which Antares frankly didn't see a problem with, in relation to how he saw the other teachers treating the older Slytherins. Some of whom probably deserved it, but still – Snape was roughly within his rights most of the time, and just because he was harsh and uniformly rude didn't mean he was trying to do 'something really, really wrong', as Granger had put it.

Although it was odd, the way he never seemed to be around on weekends. Antares smirked as he and his (already bickering) friends stood. At least, it probably looked odd to Lupin and Weasley's pure Gryffindor eyes – Antares knew quite well that Snape was more interested in going off to dreary Potions conferences and lounging about at home on the weekends than in stalking about the school and looking fishy.

*Well, if they can't see that, then that's their bloody problem*, Antares thought, poking both Blaise and Tracey hard in the back to take their attention off their silly argument about dining etiquette as they squeezed out the doors of the Great Hall through the small crush of lower-year students that seemed to have built up around the exit. And then, the next minute, Antares had forgotten all about the repeated success of his new method of stuffing up his friends' convoluted arguments, because he could suddenly see why people were milling around and whispering –

"You're holding out on us, Hermione! You *always* are –"

"I don't know why you won't believe me," Granger was whispering frantically back, waving her arms jerkily about, "but I'm telling the *truth!* That's all he *said* –"

"Well, curse me," Tracey whispered, from somewhere just in front of Antares, "that relationship didn't last long –"

Antares sighed, guilt creeping up on him uncomfortably as Blaise sniggered at the spectacle. It really was one – Neville was practically shouting in Granger's face, and Granger kept jabbering the same thing over and over again, and looking increasingly like she would cry. Not that Antares blamed her very much – Neville's temper was shockingly violent when properly roused, and, when Antares thought about it some more, he really should have seen it coming. Snape was always an unfailing bastard to the daft dolt in class, and always in a way that Neville couldn't do much against or in retaliation against. Antares privately thought that if it had been him in Neville's place, he'd have resorted to openly sabotaging classes and stealing Snape's belongings as much as possible – he could well imagine, now, how furious Neville would have to be when told that his rather wobbly suspicions about Snape were wrong, and that he was wrong. That he couldn't get Snape in trouble for something – couldn't pay him back.

Antares sighed again, pushing past Blaise and Tracey and ignoring their looks of surprise. As stupid as this would probably make him look, it really wasn't fair to leave the almost blubbing Granger to Neville's fierce lack of mercy.

"Pack it in, Lupin," Antares said firmly, speaking loud enough that he cut through Neville's current tirade. "Can't you hear what she's saying? She's been telling you the –"

"And I suppose you'd be the perfect person to be able to tell, you – you *Slytherin*," Neville snarled, turning abruptly away from his sometime friend. "This is all your fault!"

Antares bit back a rude comment, settling for just a rude tone of voice. "Oh, really?"

"She never tells us anything anymore – because of you!"

Antares rolled his eyes. "Newsflash, Lupin; the reason she doesn't tell you anything's because I don't tell her anything. If you really want to bully someone, pick on someone your own size, all right?"

Neville's eyes widened. "You mean *you're* the one that –"

“And the wheels finally start turning,” Antares said viciously, unable to hold it back on seeing the way Granger was obviously trying to distance herself from the conversation even now. “You know, Lupin, if you don’t use that Boy Wonder brain, it *rusts*.”

“You take that back,” Neville said, faintly, his hands shaking. Antares looked at him then, really looked at him, and suddenly remembered that Snape had said that, just the other – “Take it back, Black!”

Antares paused deliberately, letting the sudden hush that had fallen around them deepen and enrich his answer as he slowly said it. “No.”

Neville made a strangled sound and reached into his robe sleeve, obviously going for his wand. Antares tensed slightly, reaching for his own –

“What on earth is going on here?” Snape’s harsh, demanding query snapped into the tense silence around them, startling Antares enough that he almost jumped. “Ah, *Lupin* – laziness in my class does not content you, obviously, seeing as you choose to exhibit the same foul behaviour openly in the corridors. Fortunately,” Antares stilled completely, gulping as he felt Snape’s eyes pass over him, “there are those who are smart enough to see through your folly and combat it. Get out of my sight, you worthless boy! A point from Gryffindor for obstructing passage from the Hall, and four points from Gryffindor for further exhibiting your stupidity in public.”

Neville opened his mouth as if to say an angry retort, but Granger intervened, practically hauling him away despite the obvious misery on her face and the less obvious look she sent in the scowling boy’s unseeing direction. Antares suddenly found himself hard pressed to keep back a smile – if that wasn’t similar to the militant expression he sometimes saw on his own friends’ faces, then –

“And as for you, Black,” Snape said, curtly cutting off Antares’ somewhat bemused train of thought. “Five points to Slytherin for timely intervention in such a foolish spectacle.” Black eyes surveyed the rest of the abashed-looking students still milling around the double doors. “The rest of you may leave. Immediately.”

Antares stood rooted to the spot until Snape strode away towards the staircase that led down to the dungeons. By then, almost everyone that had been watching the whole sorry business had scarpered. Everyone, unfortunately, except for his friends.

“Antares, I really don’t know what to say,” Blaise said quietly, as Antares turned somewhat reluctantly back to them. “I just – I just don’t know what to say.”

Tracey, a strained smile on her face, simply reached out and patted Blaise on the shoulder gently. “I think he’s just like that, Blaise, really – no point worrying about something we can’t change.”

Antares blushed, and didn’t bother to explain himself then. What was the use, if everyone just constantly misunderstood him, anyway?

Blaise kept on muttering and giving Antares accusing looks all the way down to Slytherin. There, a few second years – some of them part of those that had just scarpered on Snape’s appearance upstairs – were lounging around near the entrance to the common room, speculating in low, excited whispers about something Antares had a sinking feeling was the embarrassing incident upstairs. When they saw him, their whispers grew more intense, and as Antares, Blaise and Tracey pushed past them to say the password and retreat into the common room, Antares thought that one of them might be on the verge of saying something to him.

Perhaps it was the harried look on the faces of his friends, or even the thoroughly unfriendly scowl Antares had barely been able to keep back on spotting his housemates, but somehow, he only had to whisper the password and slip into the common room after Blaise before the girl that had looked like she was about to speak started to say anything. After which point it could easily be ignored – Antares could not even think of how to explain his recent actions to his impatient friends, much less a bunch of nosy older kids that liked to prank him and snigger at him from time to time.

The common room was just half full, and even as Antares headed purposefully for the corner he and the others had taken to sitting in, another pair of students entered the room behind them, arguing lazily about something Antares couldn’t be bothered to find out about. And

then Antares could no longer pretend that this was another normal evening, and that he was just sitting down to rest his feet and gossip idly with Blaise or Tracey about the awfully exciting end of the league final between the Falmouth Falcons and the Holyhead Harpies (and it had been – Daisy Penrose, the Holyhead Seeker, had somehow taken a Bludger to the shoulder and *still* caught the Snitch). Certainly not – the look Blaise and Tracey were now exchanging was enough indication, at the very least, that somehow, tonight would involve Antares talking and talking and explaining and explaining. A lot.

Tracey gave a little nod in Blaise's direction, and suddenly, the questioning had begun.

"Why'd you bother interfering, Antares?" Tracey began, calmly. "I mean, it's not like Granger's anything special."

"It's not about anyone being special, Trace – I just – look, it was my fault she didn't have anything to say to that idiot, so I thought –"

"But how was it your fault?" Blaise burst out, interrupting Antares with an irritated look on his face. "If she was that smart, she'd have invented something to tell him. Looked to me like all he wanted to know was whether you thought Snape was brewing baby-killer in the dungeon, or something."

"I got the impression that it ran deeper than that, though," Antares said carefully, clearly able to recall the almost frenzied air of secrecy that had surrounded Granger's tentative question when she'd last cornered him in the library. "I mean, she just looked like –"

Tracey rolled her eyes, sighing audibly. "I think it's worse than we thought, Blaise – he's got a bloody crush –"

"Give it up, Tracey," Antares said, for what felt like the fiftieth time since the end of the Easter hols, when Granger had actually almost *waved* to him at the start-of-term feast. "I mean, that hair – eugh."

"Maybe next time she bothers you, you can stick your hand in – you know, see if it's a nest," Blaise said, almost thoughtfully. Antares couldn't help chuckling to himself – Blaise was always at his most



horrible when he wasn't actively thinking about being nasty. "Oh shut it, you haven't even answered my question!"

"Oh – right," Antares said sheepishly, wishing his friend didn't have such a clear grasp of when his uncomfortably insightful questions had been answered. Or not. "Didn't I, though? I just basically told her to leave me alone – as politely as possible – and told her they're all being delusional about Snape. And now that I think about it – or, at least, when I thought about it at that point – I probably should've gone with the baby-killer angle, just to satisfy Neville, if anything. I didn't know he'd go all mad on her about it, so..." Blaise sighed expressively. "Oh, what now?"

"Just let it go, Blaise," Tracey said, cutting off Blaise just as he began to speak. "Just let it go – he's just not going to see it that way."

Antares groaned. "*What* way?" It was really beyond him sometimes, all this arguing about caring and not caring and –

"The way that would've had you keep your mouth shut and not bother speaking to Granger in the first place," Blaise said bluntly. "The way that her whole stupid disagreement with Lupin and Weasley – wherever *he* is. He wasn't with Lupin, was he, Tracey?" Tracey shook her head, and Antares had to stop himself from doing the same. Funny, he almost hadn't noticed that – "Thought not. Anyway, that's all her business, Antares – not yours. And definitely not ours –"

"I don't understand how on earth it became your business just because I –"

"Give the boy a prize," Blaise said sarcastically. "Of course it's our business, you idiot – you're not our friend for decoration. Even if I'm not quite sure you ever agreed to be my friend in the first place –"

"Can we just drop that, Blaise?" Tracey said, cutting in a bit rudely. "I mean, it's not funny if we don't do it around Draco, so..."

Blaise's face took on a belligerent expression. "And? I'll do it when I want, thanks –"

“So basically,” Antares said hastily, “Granger is Not My Business. See? I’ve got it now – everyone happy?”

“Whatever,” Blaise said, his attention now more focused on the rude faces Tracey was making at him. “Tracey, you bint –”

“And did I tell you how I got the plans to the Section?” Antares said loudly, fishing them out of his pocket as quickly as possible, in order to head off the argument he could see brewing again. Tracey ceased her face-making in order to snatch at the bit of parchment, and it was only by sheer luck that the small map didn’t get torn when Blaise made a lunge for it too. Thankfully, Antares was able to put a stop to the mini struggles by seizing the map and, after a quick look around, spreading it out on a small table nearby so they could all look at it.

“It’s really well done, actually,” Blaise commented, after a brief silence. “Looks like a real map, and everything.”

“Well, Adrian said something about his dad being a mapmaker, so –”

“You mean Pucey, right?”

Antares sighed, fighting the urge to roll his eyes. Tracey always asked that, every time – “Yes, I mean Pucey.”

“Then why don’t you just say –”

“Because he’s my friend, Tracey, and calling him Pucey feels weird,” Antares said, cutting her off. “And anyway, that’s not the point, here – I’m thinking of going to get the, er, item. Since I’ve got this now,” he added, lowering his voice to a whisper as he tapped the map. Tracey nodded thoughtfully, but Blaise looked sceptical.

“When would you go, though? It’d have to be at night, wouldn’t it?” When Antares nodded, Blaise continued on in a rather hesitant tone. “But wouldn’t that mean…”

A slightly distorted image of silvery folds seemed to fall abruptly into Antares’ mind, startling him. “Blaise! Could you not do that without asking me next time, or –”

“Well, sorry,” Blaise said defensively, crossing his arms, “but we haven’t really practiced it, and it seemed like a better idea than for me to go whispering about the CI—”

“I hear you,” Antares said firmly. “I know exactly what you mean, all right? But think about it – we’re well into the summer term, right? And when exam prep starts, I won’t even want to think about going out at night. It just makes sense to do it now, I think.”

“I suppose so,” Blaise said grudgingly, still looking a bit offended. Tracey nodded by way of assent, a cheeky grin lurking somewhere underneath her sober expression. “And you can just stop looking like that, Davis – the image was clear, wasn’t it, Antares? I mean –”

“Blaise, just let it go,” Antares said wearily, almost at the same time as Tracey did. They both looked at each other and laughed then, over Blaise’s indignant mutter, and proceeded to while away the evening by playing Exploding Snap with quite a bit of cheating via furtive, image-based Legilimency. It did mean that Tracey won almost every game, as she was really the sneakiest at it, but it made for a nicely tiring evening and a few rounds of helpless laughter at the grossly funny images Tracey used to confuse both Blaise and Antares.

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Thursday passed by in a blur of charming vegetables to dance and some extremely twitchy Transfiguration work with mice, the latter resulting in near chaos when Blaise took it in his head to set the mice free from their cages before Antares could. That action had more far-reaching consequences than Antares imagined it would at the time, while swearing at Blaise’s stupidity and feeling fairly resentful at how much his friend was laughing at the panic of the girls in the class instead of trying to help Antares and McGonagall round up the excessively lively mice. After class, Tracey had frostily demanded to know why Blaise had been practically giggling himself to death alongside Draco and Ted when a mouse made a brave sally and extraordinary leap into her hair, and Blaise had had only a sort of joke as an answer.

It had easily escalated into a serious argument, with truly horrible names and expressions thrown down on both sides – an argument

that had ended badly, with Tracey accusing Blaise of being ‘just like Draco, only darker’. Antares had only just been able to drag Blaise away and bully him into a classroom so he did no one any harm. By the time dinner had come around, Blaise had been as cool and collected as ever. Only this time, he was purposely cool and collected to Tracey, and barely spoke to anyone at the table at all. That evening’s usual gathering in the common room was horribly tense, with Blaise withdrawing politely after about a quarter of an hour, and Tracey shooting poisonous looks over in his direction as he went off to the dorm.

Antares had gone to bed with a heavy heart but woken and dressed with some hope, on seeing Blaise’s normal smile and hearing his chatter. Sadly, at breakfast, things returned to their former state, with Blaise and Tracey glaring coldly at each other over the table, and Antares went to the dreaded Potions class with more dread than usual.

It didn’t go very well. Neville Lupin was horrible throughout, a thousand times clumsier than normal, and all with a sort of set to his face and an air of determination that made Antares feel like the stupid berk was upsetting their ingredients and randomly throwing in pinches of parsley on purpose. And then, that was when Antares was paying attention to the work, and not trying hard to see if his friends were killing each other three tables away.

“Don’t tell me, Black – Lupin’s slothfulness has infected you too,” Snape’s sarcastic voice said menacingly from behind them both, snapping Antares’ guilty eyes back to the cauldron they were sharing. *Oh no* – “Otherwise, I cannot fathom how on earth you have managed to produce this – this cauldron of filth.” Antares gulped as he looked down – that was filth, really. Thick, grey sludge stuck to the stirring rod he’d been using to prod vaguely at the mixture, and it smelt strongly of parsley, something that was probably Neville’s fault. “Please put down that stirring rod and stop working – there is clearly nothing to be gained from this exercise for you. Either of you.”

Antares did so immediately, feeling cross and ashamed all at once – true, he could have paid attention to the base potion he and Neville had so spectacularly failed at making, instead of keeping a firm eye

on his two lowly bickering friends. Then again, Antares thought, with a resentful sideways look in the idiot's direction as he began to clear away his needlessly pillaged ingredients, Neville could have actually bothered to be of use, somehow. True, he did seem to blight every potion they tried to make, but Neville was good at Herbology, and was perfectly fine at chopping things if he didn't get too excited, and if Snape wasn't paying especial attention to the pair of them. But today —

"You're not so smart, are you?" Neville suddenly said, his fierce whisper muddling Antares' thoughts momentarily. "You're always going on about how I'm a menace, and how I need to be watched, and there you were, away with the fairies."

Antares' eyes narrowed at his irritating partner's snide tone, but he somehow managed to keep his own voice level as he answered in an equally fierce whisper. "Fine, I wasn't paying attention — how about you, then? If *you're* so smart, why didn't you prove it today? Funny, all I can see in that cauldron is something that looks like kneazle shit and stinks of parsley." Neville reddened satisfactorily, driving Antares to go on, half out of spite and half out of a desire to set things straight. "Look, I don't know if it's escaped you somehow, but exams are in less than two months, and I can't be your partner. If I were you, I'd grow a bloody backbone and get practicing."

"Why? Snape'll just fail me anyway," Neville muttered back, his eyes flitting warily from side to side, instinctively watching out for Professor Snape as he too began to pack up his things.

Antares gave him a look. "Think about it, golden boy. If he failed you for something flimsy, you could easily — *easily* sort it out by going to McGonagall or someone else, if you deserved to pass. He hates you for a reason, you know — I think it's like a nagging tooth with him, not being able to punish a student however he likes."

"But that's so stupid," Neville began to say, sounding resentful and bewildered. "I —"

"Ah, Lupin, the realisation has finally sunk in," Snape said, a horrible smirk on his face as he loomed over them both, having appeared

from nowhere once again. “Dare we hope that it lasts? Anyone care to place bets?”

“A Galleon says he’ll be just as stupid tomorrow,” Draco said nastily, from somewhere behind them, and that put a tense end to Antares’ strange conversation with the Boy Who Lived. As Snape drawled out homework and suggested (more like ordered) that everyone submit it to Antares by Monday morning, Neville’s scowl got more pronounced, and Antares could practically feel Blaise and Tracey’s eyes burning holes in the back of his head.

“Stay a minute, Black,” Snape said, languidly, after gloating shamelessly over his projected weekend-long absence and bidding them all a good afternoon in the tone that implied he’d rather they were all dead come Monday morning. Antares nodded politely, keeping his eyes down and only moving his things to the desk closest to Snape’s large one as his classmates jostled him and whispered fearfully over the horribly taxing assignment they’d been set on their way out. As soon as Blaise and Tracey, giving Antares pointed looks, had exited the classroom, Snape shut the door with a hard flick of his wand and twisted his wand in a curious pattern. The damp, oddly chafing feeling of added magic would have startled Antares if he hadn’t been used to the way Professor Snape programmed his wards – it had actually made him jump, the first time he’d seen and felt it happen. He’d felt grateful at the time, though – oddly safer even under the seemingly suffocating wards, because he’d just sort of sensed that they weren’t the type someone like Quirrel would find easy to get around.

“As you might have already guessed, I will be making a detour at Spinner’s End,” Snape said boredly, counting and identifying the vials of potion on his desk. “I trust that you can have a letter ready for your mother in time for my departure tomorrow morning...?”

“Yes, sir,” Antares said, shifting a little uneasily on his feet, trying to suppress the excitement that welled up in him at the sudden realisation that this weekend would be *perfect* – perfect for sneaking around. Perfect for getting his bloody book back – “Another convention, sir?”

Snape gave him a sharp look, scratching some sort of tally onto the broad scroll of parchment Antares vaguely knew as the roster on which the professor marked down each practical lesson's submissions. "Drop the 'sirs', you little fool – I know very well you don't mean them."

Antares blinked. "Er, professor –"

"I saw you talking to Lupin, Antares," Snape went on, as if he hadn't heard Antares' hesitant answer, "Do you really wish to rot your mind that badly? If so, do try to go about it in style, and with students that aren't Gryffindors, for one."

"It wasn't anything important," Antares said, a little despairingly. Did everyone have to be on his case about just talking to people? It wasn't like Gryffindors were some kind of flesh-eating, mind-eroding –

"Then I suppose you wouldn't mind divulging the secrets of your little discussion," Snape said nastily. He smirked a little as Antares reddened, fighting to keep the thought of what he'd said to Neville so matter-of-factly about Snape off his face and somewhere deep inside his head. "No? Too bad, then."

"Look, sir –"

"All those 'sirs' won't get that letter written, boy. Get out." Stifling a sigh of relief, Antares retreated, his Potions supplies in tow. The feeling of damp oppression seemed to grow as he got closer to the door, enough that it actually slowed, then stopped him.

"Sir?"

"Oh, for goodness' –"

"The wards, sir," Antares said, just to be contrary. Snape sighed expansively, sitting down, but soon his wand was in the air and making that pattern – *is that in reverse to...oh, right* – again, only sort of in reverse. The air seemed to lighten, and when Antares put a tentative hand to the door handle, it felt about as normal as the rest of the doors in Hogwarts usually did.

“Either produce quill and parchment and write now, or –”

“Sorry, sir,” Antares said, his lips twitching with a smirk as he slipped through the door. “I’m going now, sir –”

“Out!” And, to emphasise Snape’s point, the door firmly closed behind Antares, leaving him only a few minutes to yank himself and his heavy-feeling cauldron through. Antares remained there for a moment, just grinning at how easy it could be to get under the professor’s skin, then was reminded by his restless stomach that it was lunchtime, and that he was better off standing and smirking in the Great Hall.

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*Dear Mum,*

*It’s getting warmer and warmer here, thank Merlin. It’s weird how the summer term just started, though, and how fast it’s going by – I’m starting to feel like any moment, exams will be here, and then I can come home again. Which I can’t wait to do, after your news – I can’t believe, still, how quick the Ministry were about getting the permit for magic in Professor Snape’s house, considering you were applying for it. Do you think Dumbledore helped? I haven’t seen him much at school for a bit, so it might have been him.*

*Anyway, I think I’m going to have lots of fun this weekend – it’s a Hogsmeade one, and Adrian Pucey and Charles Warrington (I told you about them, remember) are third years, so they can go, and they always bring back more sweets than they can afford, because they sell them to the lower years. If I’m careful, I can usually get first pick by harassing them immediately when they back, and this time I’ve got a special request from Tracey – she wants Jelly Slugs specifically. Problem is they’re all the rage in Slytherin just now – Adrian’s going to scalp us, I think, but I’ll see how low I can get him to go on them just the same. He’s a really good bargainer, for someone who doesn’t need to do any.*

*Speaking of people who don’t need to bargain, Mum, you’ll never guess – Draco Malfoy’s starting to see hallucinations. Really, though – he’s been bothering us all the way through lunch about catching Neville Lupin and his friends at smuggling dragons. Dragons, mum,*



*I'm not making this up! He said he saw them talking to one in Hagrid's hut, and that he's going to catch them at it and win Slytherin lots of points and all sorts of other useless things like that. It's absolutely hilarious watching him argue with Millicent, mum, because she's always the last one to believe him about things, and he's trying so hard to convince her and everything, while he can hear me and Blaise and Tracey sniggering nearby, and he knows that he hasn't convinced anyone else, not really. I think he's really serious about it, which only makes me think more that it's a hallucination – I think I remember him asking about dragon laws in History of Magic on Monday this week. Then again, I was half asleep, so I don't really know.*

*Anyway, that's enough about slimy sickly Malfoy. How are you, mum? You said last time that you're getting busier now, to fill up the fallshort of something – I can't remember exactly, but still. Do you still think you'll have time to train me a bit over the summer, now that Malkin's is so busy? I miss you – I can't wait to get home and get started. I'd better finish this off, so I can get this to Professor Snape before he leaves, so I'm going now. Lots of love and jelly slugs,*

*Antares.*

*PS: I forgot about my burns – forgot to tell you, sorry. The salve Snape gave me has never worked, and I'm starting to think I should go to Madame Pomfrey as well. Do you really think it'll be okay to say I don't know where I got them, or would that be too suspicious? Yours again, Antares.*

“...and check,” Tracey said triumphantly, watching the unstoppable advance of her knight on Antares’ shrieking king. Antares groaned as she laughed – more like cackled, really. Tracey, naturally competitive at the best of times, was absolutely murderous when high on sugar. Antares sent a plaintive look over at Blaise, who was still steadfastly pretending not to watch from behind his increasingly tattered copy of this month’s *Mod That Broom*, wishing that he could have been playing him instead. Though just as competitive, Blaise was a lot less giddy about his success when it came around – success that, when playing against Antares, was pretty much inevitable. Antares shook

his head and muttered useless curses against his remaining, rather traumatised pieces; he'd never been any good at chess.

"Could you keep it down, Davis?" Blaise asked, his tone the very soul of cool politeness. Tracey's face reddened, and she stuck out a rather childish tongue in Blaise's direction, causing a sneer to rise to his face as he turned his huffy attention back to what he was trying to read. Antares sighed, poking Tracey meaningfully with a foot and grimacing at the irritated look she sent him as she began to slam the chess pieces back into their respective boxes. The situation between her and Blaise had only seemed to get worse with the passage of time, as nothing Antares could say or do seemed able to make them apologise to one another and just forget about the stupid argument they'd begun with.

Doing Transfiguration homework Saturday night had been torture, in fact, as he'd been forced to shuttle back and forth between them in an effort to help both of them with the most difficult questions, and that hadn't been any easier to do while Blaise was making pointed comments about some people being too dim to understand Transfig theory. Even Draco had noticed by now, and would have been having a field day insulting all three of them right now if he hadn't been arguing vehemently with Vince and Greg – something he'd been doing for the past half hour, if Antares was right. Antares grinned then, in spite of himself – it seemed that Greg and Vince were sceptical about Draco's garbled dragon tales as well, and might be –

"Well, fine, I'll just go without you, then!" – refusing to accompany Draco on his silly witch-hunt. Draco began to shove his way toward the common room door, ignoring protests and snide comments about the fact that it was after curfew and where the idiot first year thought he was going. Antares was grinning so hard at the spectacle that he almost missed the identical grins on his friends' faces, but not hard enough that he didn't suddenly recall that he had a nightly errand to do as well. Rising abruptly to his feet, Antares dug a hand into the usual pocket to check – *yeah, there it is* – if the Cloak was inside.

"Still going?" Tracey said quietly. Antares nodded, and gave her a quick smile before setting off. "Be careful, will you? Watch out for Quirrel."

“He won’t need to, Tracey,” Blaise said, sounding insufferably superior. “I mean, as twitchy as that bastard is, he wouldn’t expose his nerves and that awful turban to the school at night.” Antares, sensing another argument from the way Tracey’s mouth had now set into a thin line, sped up his footsteps so he could get out of the room that much quicker. He was tired of mediating between them, to be frank, and wished they’d just get over whatever they needed to get over instead of bickering endlessly about it.

As Antares left the common room, a few of the older years gave him stern looks – understandable, they obviously didn’t want him being caught – but for the most part, since he was as polite as possible about weaving his way through the crowded room, no one gave him any dirty looks as he slipped out. The corridor was clear of all but a pair of blushing fourth years, one of whom Antares fleetingly thought might be a Ravenclaw, but as soon as he stepped out, they gave each other knowing looks and separated quickly. Antares kept his face blank as he quickened his footsteps, not looking back until he was quite out of sight and could do so with impunity – *yeah, he’s a Ravenclaw, all right. I wonder what her sister’ll think of that.*

Restraining the desire to hide and watch a bit longer, Antares sped up, heading immediately for the Occlumency dungeon (Blaise had christened it, if rather stupidly. He’d argued something about how everything had to have a name, which was daft, since there really was only one dungeon they ever went regularly to). He was there in a trice, and inside in a minute. Putting on his Cloak, after the weeks of practice skulking about in fear of Quirrel, was faster than ever, and though Antares wished he could somehow muffle his footsteps or movements with a Silencing Charm to make his disguise truly foolproof, he felt rather content as he darted out of the dungeon, soft folds swishing around him.

It took time to work his way up to the library, what with avoiding the occasional professor (Sinistra, who seemed to be out and about the school a lot at night) and the not-so-occasional pairs of furtive-looking students, but soon enough, he was sneaking through into the pitch-black interior of the library, and casting about for a method of lighting his way so he didn’t trip over something or get lost. After some fruitless bumping around, his eyes adjusted somewhat to the

darkness, and he was able to feel his way over to the table where the lamps were kept.

“*Lumos*,” he whispered, as quietly as possible, and when the lamp flared into being, Antares almost dropped it from laughing at the way it looked, as if it was floating in midair. He soon got a hold of himself, and made his way to the Restricted Section slowly, with plenty of stops along the way in the more dubious sections of the library, where Antares had known not to be seen going. The silver-and-black binding of the copies of Ackerson’s *Curse Compendium* glittered enticingly in the lamplight, and Antares, after spotting one or two books on mind magic among the grisly sub-section on Curses of Control, couldn’t think why he hadn’t thought to come here to search for more information on Occlumency and Legilimency. True, both of his books had said curt things about the Blind Arts ‘not being respected’ – shorthand for people thinking that they were Dark, in Antares opinion – but Antares could name at least five books in the shelves around him that contained spells that were significantly less deserving of ‘respect’.

Eventually, Antares made his way all the way back to the rope dividing the Restricted Section from the rest of the library. Before stepping over it, he paused to extract the map Adrian had given him – a rather irritating task, with the way he had to make sure the Cloak didn’t slip off while holding the lamp in one hand and shuffling about in his pockets with the other. A minute or two saw him stepping carefully over the dividing rope and moving to the last of the shelves on the left and counting away from there, so he could be sure he had the right one.

The notes on Adrian’s map guided him safely around a shelf full of books chained to queer metal struts built in the back of the shelf, and advised him to avoid a sinking patch of floor a few paces away, and by the time Antares had wriggled and stumbled his way down the long shelf, he’d begun to think that he’d gotten the better deal out of the exchange with Adrian and Charles. The next moment, he’d forgotten all about that, because he could see the three copies of *Ars Decoctum* right in front of him, and his hand was already reaching out to the one on the left, because he could practically feel the traces of

his hasty, exhausting Transfiguration still lingering about the heavy, almost ugly binding of the book.

Thankfully, it eased off the shelf with no problem, and when Antares lowered the lamp to the floor and checked the back half of the book – *yeah, this is it* – he found the cramped, telltale print of the last section of *The Artes Wich Neede No Sichte*, which he'd not been able to change or disguise. Antares fingered them possessively, his irritation at Granger and her insatiable curiosity resurging as he shrunk the book and shoved it deep into his trouser pocket; he had no time to change it now, and would rather do it deep in the safety of the dungeons anyway, rather than here, crouching low in the Restricted Section.

Antares was out of there in a trice, having chosen to go to the end of the current row and circle round to go back to the dividing rope past one of the rare shelves with no traps or enchantments lurking about. He stepped over the rope with a light heart, and even indulged himself a little by leafing rapidly through one of Ackerson's *Compendiums* to see if he could find anything to better his casting of a fairly tricky curse that made you unnaturally clumsy for hours on end. It was only when he realised his the candle in the lamp was melted almost half the way down that Antares closed it and scrambled to his feet, eager to get back to the dungeons.

Unfortunately for him, it would be a lot less easy than he thought. There seemed to be voices everywhere – footsteps thumping up and down, accompanied by angry whispers and something that sounded uncannily like the grating wheeze of Filch. By the time Antares had manoeuvred his way down to the second floor, he'd begun to feel extremely paranoid that he would be caught by whoever seemed to be following him somehow, and by the time he'd clattered down the stairs that led down into the front hall, he'd already decided what to do. Slamming carelessly into the broom closet next to the doors of the Great Hall, Antares whipped off the Cloak and stuffed it away in his pockets as fast as he could, heart pounding as the sound of dragging footsteps and Filch's cackling came nearer and nearer.

The footsteps diminished after a while, as if the unlucky soul caught by the horrid caretaker was being led down into the dungeons – a

*Hufflepuff, maybe?* – and Antares began to breathe easier again, and soon decided it was safe enough to slip out of the closet and head for the stairs to the dungeons. He was wrong.

“Oh, this is absolutely preposterous! You there, stop immediately!”

Antares froze. No, it couldn't be –

But it was. Professor McGonagall's eyes seemed to pierce Antares as he stood there, feeling helpless. “Four students out in one night – ridiculous!” She seized hold of him angrily, propelling him toward the stairs to the dungeon. “And I suppose you have another tale to tell, like the others? That Malfoy – the most foolish sort of imagination I have ever seen –”

Antares spluttered then – Draco? *Draco* had been caught? That could only mean –

“I will have words with Professor Snape over this,” McGonagall continued, in the same steely tone, her grip only tightening on Antares' arm when he stumbled at the foot of the stairs. “If you have some excuse for your behaviour, Black, you'd better start voicing it, immediately.”

Antares paled. If she'd caught Draco, that would mean points, and since she'd got *him* as well...“Professor, I'm sorry, but I thought –”

The patchy apology Antares had been about to make faltered and died on his lips as they turned the corner. For there was Snape, towering menacingly over a frightened-looking Draco as Filch looked on gleefully. The look on Snape's face alone would have made Antares quail in itself, but coupled with the knowledge that he would be facing that look with immediate effect, it stopped his tongue almost entirely, especially because Antares had thought Snape wouldn't be back this early, what with the way the man had ordered everyone to give their homework to him on Monday. It felt horrible being marched up like this – as if something or someone was conspiring against him.

“This is not to be borne,” Snape pronounced immediately on seeing Antares, his already thunderous scowl becoming even more so. “Tell

me, Mr. Malfoy, of the mental disease you clearly suffer from – is it catching?”

“I found him loitering around in the front hall,” McGonagall said darkly, letting go of Antares’ arm as if it burned her. She sniffed disdainfully, turning away almost immediately. “I trust you will deal with the matter?”

“Twenty more points from Slytherin,” Snape said tersely, by way of answer, giving Antares a look of loathing. “Now get out of my sight, Black – I don’t wish to taint my ears with whatever cock-and-bull story you have to explain your useless behaviour.”

Antares, eyes widening, immediately began to obey. But that was not all – “Oh, and Black? Detention. Perhaps that will teach you not to listen to the nonsense of Mr. Malfoy.” McGonagall added from behind, her tone full of doubtful disgust, clearly signalling that she didn’t think it would work. Antares tensed, but kept his mouth shut – there wouldn’t be any point to arguing, now, that he hadn’t been involved in whatever dragon rubbish Draco had probably spouted. “Good evening, Professor – Mr. Filch.”

“I believe I can also bid you good evening as well, Mr. Filch,” Snape said darkly. “You can rest assured that Mr. Malfoy will be punished...adequately.” Antares didn’t dare look back, not with the way Draco gulped, obviously frightened of the talking-to he was about to receive. But Antares, heading quickly for the safety of Slytherin, couldn’t think about Draco’s predicament for too long, considering his own plight – twenty fucking points, twenty, and all because he hadn’t thought to wait a little longer in a stupid bloody *broom closet*.

Antares sighed, mumbling the password again when the wall refused to budge. He’d probably never hear the end of this, and what was worse, he couldn’t explain it. At least Draco *had* a cock-and-bull story that, though ridiculed, seemed to hold some sort of water with Snape and McGonagall. Antares, still shocked by how easily he’d been caught, could only muster up a feeble sequence about him going to the library at night, which, as he repeated it silently to himself on the way down the dorm corridor, sounded even more embarrassing than

Draco's fantastical tale. Who got caught sneaking out to the library, anyway?

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As Antares found out over the next week or so, not many people got caught sneaking off to the library. Or, at least, not many that would admit to it. Despite the sleepy brainstorm he'd had with Blaise on returning to the dorm immediately after the fact, Antares had been unable to come up with anything that sounded as true – he certainly wasn't meeting with any girls after dark, and couldn't bear the thought of linking his actions that evening with Draco's monumental stupidity.

'Exploring the castle' had just sounded weak, and 'trying to find my missing schoolbag' sounded even weaker, leaving Antares with the relatively least pathetic excuse of wanting to read something dodgy in the library. The second and third years mocked him for a few days by turning up to disturb him whenever he tried to study in the library, and one or two of the prefects warned him to pack it in whenever they saw him out close to curfew, but overall, Antares didn't get treated too badly, and certainly didn't get mocked as viciously as Draco did.

Then again, Antares didn't really have anything to complain about, as far as unpopularity went. He'd never really been popular to begin with, and to be sniggered at and elbowed roughly in the corridors was nothing that new. What would have been really horrible was what was happening to Neville Lupin and Hermione Granger, who, Antares quickly found out, had also been caught out on the same night. Tracey, on hearing the news, had disappeared for well over an hour, trading information with various first years she knew in the other houses, and even looked a little unconvinced when she returned to the Occlumency dungeon to deliver the news she'd found.

"It just doesn't make sense," she'd kept saying, with the usual irritated little frown that melded itself to her expression whenever she found something particularly puzzling. Blaise and Antares had explained and argued in vain of the fifty points Neville and Granger had lost for Gryffindor – a hard-won fifty points from the narrow Gryffindor-Hufflepuff game in back in February, which the Gryffindors had obviously been hoping would take them all the way to the House cup



with judicious management. Tracey had shrugged, despite everything, still saying something was off about the whole fake dragon thing.

“I mean, Granger’s smart,” she’d finally said, “but lying to Draco’s something *I’d* have done. Granger’s too rule-mad to think of stuff like that.”

“But there wasn’t a dragon,” Antares had said, irritably. Tracey had just shrugged again and said something nothing being impossible, which had sparked off a mini-argument between her and Blaise again – thankfully nothing serious, though. Antares didn’t know for sure, but he thought his friends had come to a sort of truce after the loss of points. All he hoped was that it would last.

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“D’you think you’ll be all right?”

Antares groaned. “Blaise, no offence, but you’ve asked that about ten times this evening –”

“Don’t be rude, he’s just worried,” Tracey said, looking up from the Charms notes she and Blaise had just been fighting over. “Filch is an absolute pig at detention, I’ve heard, and yours is so late in the day –”

“Tracey, it’s not like he can chain us up and whip us or something – he’d get in trouble,” Antares said crossly, peering over her shoulder at the weird diagram she was sort of poking at on the notes. “And look, if you’re going to draw on my notes –”

“Oh, that thing? It was there already – maybe Blaise did it.”

“Don’t look at me,” Blaise said hastily, looking only a little guilty. “When have I ever scribbled on your notes anyway, Antares?”

Rolling his eyes, Antares suppressed several examples that sprang to mind – the note from Professor Snape had said to be in the Potions classroom at 10:30, well in time for him to escort the two boys up to the entrance hall and hand them over to Filch for their detention, and it was almost twenty-five past. “I think I’m just going to go – it’s almost ten thirty, so.” Antares nudged Tracey as he

straightened up. “And Tracey? That incantation is fine, don’t cross it out – Flitwick told me.”

Tracey grumbled something about Apprentices and their stupid privileges, but blotted impatiently at the parchment anyway. “Just be careful, all right? If you just keep mum and do what he asks, I’ve heard he’ll just grumble and leave you alone...”

Antares couldn’t hold back a grin. “Whatever, Trace. Don’t wait up all night.” He set off quickly, carefully avoiding the more rabid older students, all of whom seemed to be gathered round one of the larger sofas in the centre of the common room, arguing about something to do with Runes. With all the tension of exams being around the corner, Antares’ loss of points seemed to have been largely forgotten, and things had gradually simmered down to an all-round helping of resentful looks, which, if not normal, was a lot better than having people jostling Antares and his friends in the library, especially at such an important time.

Antares sighed as he left, noticing that Draco was nowhere to be seen – that meant he himself might be late, or would at least be seen to be. Snape’s note had been uncompromisingly short and simple, with a steely threat behind it that promised worse than a detention with Filch if Antares and Draco didn’t show up on time. When Antares finally knocked on Snape’s door and sidled in as it opened of its own accord, he realised he needn’t have worried – Draco was nowhere to be seen.

Snape, seated at the large teacher’s desk in the empty classroom, barely looked in Antares’ direction as he approached, his eyes and hands busy with the reams of parchment scattered on and over the surface of the desk. By the time Snape actually looked up, Antares was twitching in the direction of the slowly reopening door to the side – a moment later, a sullen-looking Draco had shuffled in and was trying vainly to close the door.

“Stop that,” Snape snapped, dark eyes fixed uncomfortably on Antares as he said so. Draco abruptly put an end to his struggles, shuffling nervously to stand beside Antares in front of Snape’s desk. “*Tempus* – ah, late as always, Draco.” Draco tensed, but did so in

vain – the only real reaction Snape displayed at the ghostly grey figures that appeared between them was a look of disdain. “As you are both here, you will make your way to the entrance hall, from where Mr. Filch will convey you to your detention.”

“Sir,” Draco said, almost immediately, sounding bewildered, “in your note, it said –”

Snape sighed heavily. “I am well aware of what was in that note, Draco. Have you somehow failed to notice that I am, in fact, very busy?”

“Sir, I –”

“Then I suggest you take yourself off to the entrance hall immediately.” Draco’s face fell, and he actually lingered behind for a minute as Antares headed for the door, wanting to get this over with as soon as possible. Antares didn’t bother waiting for Draco to fall in behind him, setting off as fast as possible for the entrance hall. The earlier they got through whatever lousy errand Filch had in mind for them, the better –

Soon enough, Filch’s gleeful voice could be heard. “And here they come! Look at them, dragging their lazy feet, as if they weren’t caught fair and square...” Antares shuddered minutely, hoping that whatever task that had been set them wouldn’t take too long. All he could think about was that humongous backlog of History of Magic notes he needed to reread in time for the exam, as well as the comprehensive plant list that he’d begged off Terry Boot so he and Blaise could catch up on Herbology, and – “Now, we wait for the other two little sneaks – shouldn’t be long.”

Antares blinked. The other two? But –

“Who are we serving our detention with?” Draco demanded. He needn’t have bothered, for Antares could already see the slouched forms of Neville Lupin and Hermione Granger descending the marble stairs behind them. Antares sighed – now, as well as dealing with Filch’s gloating, he’d have to deal with Draco and Neville arguing and insulting each other, and maybe even Granger’s whingeing –

“Follow me,” Filch said, sounding entirely too happy for Antares’ comfort. Antares did, steadfastly refusing to look in the direction of Draco or the other two as they were led out the front doors, the guttering light of Filch’s lamp bobbing before them in the darkness. For one thing, he just didn’t feel like saying anything – whatever prank Granger and Lupin had been playing Draco to get him to believe that nonsense about the dragon had certainly contributed to Antares horribly unlucky capture. And for another, he was far too busy wondering what they were going to do – muck out the greenhouses? Because otherwise, he couldn’t see why they were being led out this way. And, of course, Morgana forbid he *asked* – Filch would only cackle some more and scold him for being impertinent, and maybe even change his mind so that –

*Wait, we’re not heading towards that hut, are we? Because if we are*  
–

“Filch, is that you? Hurry up, then, before the night’s over.” Antares gulped. Hagrid. Of all the people to possibly be overseeing the –

“And I suppose you think you’ll be having it easy with that oaf, Lupin?” Filch said, the gloating tone in his voice now almost sickeningly strong. “Well, I’ve never thought a night in the forest easy, myself –”

“The forest?” Draco said, suddenly stopping in his tracks. “*The Forbidden Forest*? We’re not allowed in at night, it’s dangerous!”

“Next time, you’ll think about that before you go tramping about after curfew, I suppose,” Filch said, cackling. “If there *is* a next time for you, that is –”

Antares barely heard the rest of the sentence, because Hagrid – *Hagrid* was stamping up to them, sounding like a thousand earthquakes even on the short grass near his horrid little hut. And that dog with him was *huge*, growling and snarling as it came up –

“Yer’ late, Filch,” Hagrid boomed rudely. Filch gave him a look of disgust as he strode up, his attention diverted from the clear look of relief that Neville and Granger were sharing. “Bin waiting quarter of

an hour for yeh – s'abou' time yeh finally showed up." Hagrid gave Neville a curt nod. "All right, Lupin?"

"He won't be for long," Filch said, leering nastily at all of them. "Those werewolves in there get mighty hungry of a night –"

"That's enough, Filch," Hagrid said firmly, starting to swing around. Filch simply cackled in answer, heading straight for the castle, his light bobbing crazily as he made his winding way for the front doors. "Now, if you lot jus' follow me –"

"I'm not going in there," Draco said, sounding panicked. "I – there are *werewolves* –"

Hagrid snorted. "'Snot full moon, Malfoy – no werewolves to be had in the forest. Now, if you'll –"

"Didn't you hear? I'm not going in that forest!" Draco was starting to sweat, now, and his eyes were wide with fear. "This isn't proper, we should be writing *lines*, not tramping about doing servant's work at night –"

"Lines? *Lines*?" Hagrid snorted, turning back round to face them. "What use are lines to anyone, eh? This is *Hogwarts*, boy – yeh can be useful, or yeh can twiddle back to the castle, and tell yer parents why Dumbledore expelled yeh for refusing to serve a simple detention." Draco paled at that, his expression furious, but he looked down in the end. There was really no answer to that statement, even for him –

"Now, if yer all done complainin'," Hagrid said, sounding irritated, "follow me, an' be quiet. Our job tonight's dangerous, an' I don' want no one takin' risks, all right?" Granger and Neville murmured something that sounded like a reply, which seemed to satisfy Hagrid, for he turned immediately and began to lead them to the very edge of the forest. Draco lagged behind but didn't dare do more than glare at everything in sight as he did so, and Antares, despite his own apprehension, couldn't help but notice that Draco didn't lag very far behind.

“Look there,” Hagrid said, jolting Antares out of his somewhat bemused, nervous thoughts. Antares looked, and saw the track the man’s large arm was pointing down, his large lamp swinging slightly. Good god, this couldn’t get any more creepy – “See that silvery stuff shinin’ – there, on the ground? That’s unicorn blood. There’s a unicorn in there –”

Antares tuned out. Unicorn blood – unicorn *blood*. Christ, he’d never hear the end of this if his mother found out. And besides, if something was repeatedly injuring unicorns in the forest like Hagrid had just said, the forest was the last place Antares would ever want to be. He found himself wanting to agree with Draco – if not for the lines, then for more normal detentions, like scrubbing floors and polishing things and so on. Anything was better than walking aimlessly in the forest after dark looking for something mad enough and powerful enough to hurt a unicorn this badly.

“And what if whatever’s hurting the unicorns finds us first?” Draco was asking belligerently, his fear showing openly on his face.

Hagrid waved his hand dismissively. “There’s nothin’ livin’ in the forest that’ll hurt yeh if yer with me or with Fang here,” he said, gesturing fondly towards the growling dog at his side. Antares gave the large beast a wary look, feeling unsure of whether whatever was hurting the unicorns would wait for Fang to hurt him first, or – “Right, we’ll split now – trail goes in two diff’rent directions, so we’ll go in two parties. Poor thing must’ve been staggerin’ since last night, with all the blood everywhere.”

“I want Fang,” Draco said quickly. Antares gave him a look of consternation – god, he hoped he wasn’t put with him and that dog –

“Mightn’t do yeh much good,” said Hagrid, handing Fang’s leash over to Draco all the same. “I warn yeh, he’s a coward.” But, seeing Draco seize gratefully at the leash, Hagrid shrugged. “Suit yerself, Malfoy. So now – Neville, yeh can go with Draco an’ Fang, and Hermione and Black can come with me. Green sparks if any of us finds the unicorn, and red if yeh get in trouble, so we can find yeh – practice it, go on –” A somewhat baffled mixture of red and green sparks flew into the air,

and Hagrid hurriedly waved at them to stop. "Right. Be careful, everyone – off we go."

Antares swallowed hard as they set off into the dark, silent forest. They soon separated, with Draco, Neville and Fang taking the right fork in their path, and Antares, Granger and Hagrid taking the left. Silence shrouded them, muffling their footsteps oddly as they went along, eyes noting the spots of silvery blood on the ground. Antares' heart, which had been beating almost twice as fast as normal as they started into the forest, had just started to slow down when he saw a faint shower of red, just above the –

*Shit.* "Sir, look, there's red sparks –"

"You two wait here," Hagrid growled, drawing a huge crossbow off his back – one Antares hadn't even noticed around the man's hairy bulk – and setting a large arrow to the string. "Stay on the path, yeh hear? I'll be back!" And, just like that, he went crashing away through the undergrowth. The hair on the back of Antares' neck prickled horribly, and he felt his grip tighten around his wand – when had he drawn it? – almost unbearably.

"They can't have been hurt," Granger whispered faintly, sounding terrified. "They can't, we just got in –"

Antares had nothing to say to that. He simply held on to his wand, listening hard despite fact that he could only hear the rustling of leaves around them now. Being afraid was all very well, but if something did happen to them now, and he just froze up –

Granger gasped, and Antares almost did the same – *what was that?*

"Did you hear –" Granger began shakily, but there it was again, a slithering, whispering movement, like a cloak dragging across the leaves –

Antares seized her by the arm. "Be quiet," he mouthed, raising his wand, already preparing himself to cast a quiet *Legilimens* – it wouldn't hurt to know if something was nearby, and anyway, she wouldn't know –

Pain flashed thickly through Antares' head, and he knew immediately that something was very wrong. The very leaves seemed to have stopped rustling, and fear seemed to hum across his skin in piercing fragments, his instinct shrieking insistently at him to move, and move now –

"*Syngrapho*," Antares finally breathed, giddy with the sudden realisation of what he could do. Why hadn't he thought of it before? It was so easy –

"What are you doing?" Granger hissed, alarmed at the way the leaves and the ground beneath them shimmered briefly.

"Making a Safe Circle," Antares said calmly, relaxing his arm as the spell took hold, enveloping them in what felt like a tight circle of calm. "It's not great, but I've been told it works best outside – should hold us all right until Hagrid comes back –"

And, almost as if in answer to Antares' shaky confidence, a loud crunching noise signalled Hagrid's return. Antares had to force himself to stand still and not shrink back in alarm – the large man was furious, and was berating Draco and Neville, who trailing sulkily along behind him.

"A ruddy waste of time," he growled, handing Fang's leash to a startled Antares. "Can't even go minutes without fightin' – be lucky, we will, if we see anythin' now –"

Antares' heart sank, for he had an idea of what was coming. "But sir –"

"Go on with Malfoy, Black," Hagrid said sternly, giving Draco a hard look. "Least he'll have a harder time pickin' fights with his housemate." Hagrid gave Antares an uncomfortably direct look, making no effort to mask his words as he went on. "Flitwick's always told me yer one for keeping yer cool, Black – up to it?"

There was really nothing for it. After that little fright, Antares was ready to do anything, now, to finish up this awful detention and get back to the castle – going along with Draco wasn't much of a trial, compared to the thought that they could be doing this all night. "Yes,



sir," Antares said, a little regretfully. Draco was glaring at him now, as if he'd somehow forced Hagrid into saying something so oddly flattering, but he supposed it couldn't be helped.

Antares reminded himself of that when Draco lost no time in bickering with him and demanding that he be the one to lead the restless Fang. Antares, gritting his teeth in annoyance (*does he want to stay in here all night?*), gave in without complaint, not particularly caring to hold on to the dog, which he'd quickly discovered was about as far from menacing as one could possibly be, and irritatingly free with its slobbering tongue.

He and Draco soon found the path, and after complaining for some time, Draco finally subsided and began to concentrate on actually looking at the progressively thicker splashes of blood on the leaves and tree roots. Antares gradually began to realise that the odd, bittersweet smell that hung heavy in the air around them was that of the unicorn blood. It smelt somehow wrong, a thick, cloying sort of wrong that raised the hair on the back of Antares' neck and had him wishing fervently that they'd find the poor injured thing and just end this fruitless search. The path was getting thicker, too, and he and Draco were starting to have to stumble on tree roots and squeeze round thick tree trunks to keep on it. It was hot work, and they scratched themselves several times, which only strengthened Antares' resolve to finish this and be gone.

Suddenly, the path seemed to widen a bit, then twist around an old, old oak tree. And then –

"Merlin," Draco muttered. Antares remained silent, for it was impossible to be anything but, at the sight before them. The unicorn was dead, all right – the stiffened arch of its pale neck and the way its legs were splayed awkwardly on the ground told Antares so. The smell of blood had intensified, and indeed, silvery blood was splattered thickly around the bright white of the fallen unicorn. It was horrible in all sense of the word, and it was a while before Antares thought to turn to Draco and suggest that they send up the green sparks.

But Draco's eyes were wide, his attention elsewhere, and Antares turned his head impatiently in the direction Draco was looking, because he looked so –

Draco screamed, and Antares nearly followed suit. And good god, they had reason; there was a dark figure loping hungrily over to the fallen unicorn, silver splashes speckling its coat in the most horribly suggestive manner. And then Antares could barely see or think any more, for pain had split him down the middle – he could faintly hear what sounded like Draco bolting, and could even feel his wand in his hand, burning terribly as magic seemed to boil out from the very pores of his skin –

Something crackled above him, whipping air over his head, and somehow it jolted him into action. Fighting the awful pain, Antares turned and ran, his back feeling like it was on fire, and like the fire was spreading to the rest of his limbs. He didn't dare look back, didn't *dare*, it might be following him –

*“Not that way!”* someone seemed to shout at him, and Antares turned obediently, almost before he realised what he was doing. But he couldn't stop to see who was speaking, because he thought he'd seen that tree before, and maybe he'd gotten back to the path – “Stop running, will you? I can't keep up.” Antares jumped, whipping around to face whoever it was that had spoken so loudly behind him, only to see –

No. Just – no.

But the fairly large snake was rolling off the tree in front of him in thin, grey coils, and it was already speaking again. “I thought you'd never hear,” it said crossly, its words coming shortly, as if it was out of breath. “You don't seem to listen very well.”

Antares tried to hold back the question, but it was impossible. “Are you – are you talking to me?” he demanded, his own breath coming quick and fast. Silence seemed to prevail in this part of the forest, and that – that thing seemed to be nowhere in sight, so that was good. His back still felt like it was on fire, but he could move, and that was good. Everything was good.

Except that the snake was *still talking*. “You also don’t seem to think at all,” it said testily, slithering up to Antares and rearing up as if to look him over. “I’m not sure I should have bothered to help, now, but there you go –”

A crashing sound began to come from nearby, interrupting the snake mid-complaint. “I don’t suppose you couldn’t drop by again sometime, when it’s not so busy in here,” the snake grumbled, now heading past Antares, who felt almost unable to move or speak. “You seem rather stupid, but you could probably catch rats well enough...” Antares gulped, unable to take his eyes off the sinuous movements as the snake slithered away into the undergrowth, its voice growing fainter as it did so.

The crashing sound intensified, and Antares thought he could hear Hagrid’s booming voice. It felt painful to raise his stiffening arm, like his back muscles had frozen partially of their own accord, but Antares did it anyway, sending up a shower of red sparks. If it was Hagrid and the others coming, it would make it easier for them to find him. And if not, well – he’d deal with it, somehow.

The minutes ticked by slowly, and Antares felt the pain in his back diminish almost in proportion to the strength of the crashing sounds as they drew nearer. Finally, just when he was contemplating trying to strike out on his own – he knew faintly how to perform a Four-Point spell, and remembered vaguely that Hogwarts was east of the forest – Antares heard Fang barking, and a minute later, Hagrid crashed into view, Fang at his side.

“Did Draco find you?” Antares asked faintly, finally allowing him to sit down. “Because –”

Hagrid made an impatient, almost worried sort of motion with his large hand. “Malfoy’s fine, Black – what happened to yeh?” Antares shrugged, still trying inwardly to process all that had just happened. “Up to walkin’?”

“Y-yeah,” Antares muttered, rising shakily to his feet. Hagrid snorted, and Antares didn’t even have time to protest or exclaim in alarm as he was swept up awkwardly by the arm and somehow tucked under Hagrid’s arm. It was a moment before he’d stopped feeling horribly

dizzy, and by then, they had started moving again, and it was too much work keeping the branches and leaves out of his face for Antares to even try to gather together the words to refuse this sort of treatment. And he realised very quickly that Hagrid was moving far too fast for him to have kept up anyway – something that he appreciated, since every step took him farther away from the awful scene with the unicorn and the infinitely more confusing one with the snake.

They soon got back on the path, at a point where the blood was much thinner than Antares had seen when walking with Draco, and it only took a few more minutes before they came upon the others. Draco was there, looking thoroughly frightened, as were Neville and Granger, and – Antares' eyes widened – there were two centaurs with them, pawing impatiently at the ground and squinting hard at Hagrid and Antares as they came closer. Antares wriggled in embarrassment, his face growing hot with the thought of just how stupid and weak he probably looked, being carried under Hagrid's arm like a – like a paper bag, or something, and when Hagrid finally stopped, Antares was only too glad to be set roughly on his feet.

"I appreciate yer help, Bane – Ronan," Hagrid was saying gruffly. "Wouldn'tve wanted to leave the children here on their own while I went to fetch –"

"Black?" Antares started, nodding hesitantly. Had one of the centaurs just – "Your classmates told us your name."

"I thought you were behind me," Draco said stiffly, looking thoroughly uncomfortable as he did so. "Didn't think you'd be daft enough not to run –"

"There'll be none of that," Hagrid said sharply, giving Draco a quelling look. "Tis time you lot were back at the castle, anyway."

Granger looked relieved, and so did Neville. But the idiot couldn't seem to help himself, somehow, going on to protest in a small, irritatingly brave tone. "But Hagrid, the unicorn –"

"I know where it is," Hagrid said shortly, looking determined and somehow angry. Antares, thinking back to the heavy smell and the

shocking silver-and-white in that clearing, couldn't help but understand why. "I'll deal with it just fine – as for you lot, it's high time yeh were back at the castle." He turned abruptly to the centaurs, who had begun to drift away from the group. "Thanks again, you two."

One of them nodded slowly, and the other, a pale blond with a palomino body, gave Antares a piercing, unsettling look, before looking back at Hagrid. "It was our pleasure, Hagrid," he said, simply. And then his eyes were on Antares again, making him want to fidget. "And you, Black – next time, I advise you run." His companion gave him a sort of warning look, and the next minute, the two of them were galloping away down the path and back into the deep forest.

"I wouldn't worry my head about that warning if I were you," Hagrid said gruffly, breaking the small hush that had fallen over all of them. "They're not one for giving straight answers, are centaurs."

It was a long walk back to the castle, and seemed even longer because of the stiff silence that fell on all of them as they wound their way up to the double doors. The moon shone high in the sky, and the darkness seemed even thicker about them somehow, the slightly dimming light from Hagrid's lamp casting deep shadows every which way. Antares' back had stopped itching so fiercely, and had subsided to a low, insistent throbbing – manageable, but irritating. Almost frightening, in a way, considering how it had flared up so much when he'd met that – thing.

Shivering, Antares tried to keep from thinking too hard about the encounter until they reached the castle, and even then, he felt like his mind had frozen over when Hagrid strongly suggested that they all return to bed as quickly as possible, and advised that Draco and Antares go down to Professor Snape before they did so. Neville and Granger exchanged a significant look at that, but Antares could not bring himself to care – he felt scratched and painful and sore in a way that went deeper than the scratches on his arms and legs, and in no mood to think about whatever stupid theories the Gryffindors were thinking up now.

As they descended the stairs to the dungeons, Draco tried to speculate about what they'd seen in the forest. Ignoring him didn't

seem to have any effect, and he chattered nervously all the way down to Snape's classroom.

"...they should cleanse the forest," Draco was insisting as the door opened soundlessly before them, "If there weren't werewolves and strange things in there, then maybe unicorns wouldn't get hurt all the time. Or they could –"

Snape's voice cut through Draco's, the annoyance in it like the cracking of a whip. "Is there any conceivable reason for your presence here, Mr. Malfoy? Mr. Black?"

"Professor, we were attacked!" Draco exclaimed immediately, and it was a long time before Snape could silence him. His eyes continually strayed to Antares despite his silence, or perhaps because of it – Antares couldn't think to add anything in a way that wouldn't end up with him explaining just how he'd gotten away from the unicorn-killer in the woods, and the last thing he wanted to do was explain that in front of Draco.

"Now, if you'll just drink that," Snape said, sounding a little weary, "you should be fine. Is there anything else, Draco?" Draco, clutching fiercely at the small vial of Calming Draught that Snape had barely had to convince him to take, shook his head. "Good. Now, if you'll excuse us." Draco left hastily, giving Antares a speculative look over his shoulder as he left the classroom. Antares sighed – he was sure everyone would hear about the unicorn-killer and how *he'd* somehow been ripped open by it, or –

"Come this way," Snape said, and Antares followed blindly. He barely heard Snape's office door shut behind them, and sat down only at the firm urging of the professor's hand. He just didn't think he could do this – "I suppose a Calming Draught wouldn't be out of the question...?"

Antares shook his head, and, a few minutes later, was gripping a vial of some Calming Draught almost as tightly as Draco had been, just moments ago. It seemed to taste of nothing, but something seemed to relax within him as he drank, and soon enough, Antares set the vial down, his breathing coming easier.

“There was a snake,” Antares found himself saying, without prompting. “I talked to it.” He didn’t look up – didn’t want to. “It – it talked to me first, so that was all right. I wasn’t rude.”

“Antares –”

“I think it saved me,” Antares said, quietly, ignoring the alarm in Snape’s voice. He continued, easily pushing away the thoughts of the way that alarm wasn’t quite complete, the way that alarm was shot through with curiosity, because if he thought about it – “I just – when I saw the thing, you know, that hurt the unicorn, I just froze. It was like...” Antares faltered, “...like someone was splitting me open, from the back.” He took a deep breath, hoping that Snape would just stay silent, just let him finish – “I don’t know if it heard Draco scream, but – I didn’t wait. The snake was – I think –” Antares waved stiffly above his head, flinching at the way the pain in his back flared up again, “– up here. I don’t know, it just – just shook me out of it, I guess, and I ran.” He stopped, then. There was really nothing else he could think of saying, nothing but stupid things to do with why on earth he’d heard the snake and how he was still sort of sure it was an illusion, and that the unicorn-killing thing had sent him mad, and –

“Take another sip,” Snape said shortly, rising up from his restless seat behind the large desk in the office. Antares did, and noted with some alarm that his hands were shaking. “Would you – do you wish to speak with your mother, or...?” Antares nodded hard. Snape nodded slowly as if in reply, and moved toward the fireplace on the side. Flames shot up in the hearth at a word from Snape, and then he was sprinkling Floo powder into the fire sticking his head into flames, his words muffled but familiar – “Spinner’s End!”

And then, after some muffled talking and withdrawing of heads and so on, Bella’s tired face was in the flames, and nothing seemed to be quite as frightening as before.

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*A/N: I can’t believe I did this. I came into this weekend with only 4000 words done and a massive amount to get through, and somehow I got to the end of this. Somehow. I really hope you enjoyed reading this, as I did enjoy writing it, even though it exhausted and even*

*bored me at points – it gets hard to stay on top of things when you're not writing consistently, as I've found. But anyway, the next chapter, which is the second-to-last for first year (finally, eh?), will be called Three Examinations, and is set to be even more pivotal than this one. Hopefully, I'll not drop the ball on it during the week like I did for this chapter. Till next time, Adios, amigos! As always, reviews are love.*



## **Chapter 20: Three Examinations**

Waking up with his back itching would have seemed rather odd to Antares weeks ago. But today, it only felt like yet another pressure he had to bear up under until school ended, and someone who actually knew anything about his burns (i.e., Bella) could take a good look at them and try to find out what the problem was instead of dosing him with foul-tasting remedies and forcing him to rub on sickeningly sweet salves. So Antares only gave in to a grimace or three as he squirmed stiffly out of bed, picking up things for his morning shower along the way.

“*Tempus*,” Antares said quietly, tapping his wand on the side of his bed as he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, and he wasn’t surprised to see that it was about six – he’d evened out to waking up at that time sometime after the spring term. What he was surprised to see was how many people were awake and shambling about the shower room as well. Antares had sort of expected a few more than the usual one or two sleepy fourth or fifth years, as it was exam week, but not more than a dozen people, barely speaking to each other as they privately recited things under their breath.

Well. It definitely made for a more awkward shower, but thankfully didn’t lead into the few people that actually noticed Antares trying to corner him to ask him questions. People had been doing that lately, ever since Draco’s dramatic, embarrassing revelation of his and Antares’ ordeal of sorts in the forest, and though Antares was as discouraging as possible towards them, there were always one or two who felt like taking a chance.

After a rather quick shower, Antares trooped back to the dormitory to dress up. The tension in the shower room followed him, bending his thoughts to the long-dreaded History of Magic exam that would take place sometime today – everyone said History came first all the time, except for during the OWLs and NEWTs, the timetables of which were more random. The most he could remember right now wasn’t promising, and it stopped Antares from smiling back when Blaise shot him a bleary grin on his own way out to the showers.

Blaise frowned predictably, and Antares wanted to kick himself. Somehow he'd forgotten how worried Tracey had been last night when he'd avoided Blaise's intense questioning about what had happened in the Forest yet again – this just wasn't the time for confrontations. Antares had a strong feeling that if he didn't tell them something soon, they'd try to make him or even try to examine his mind or something, which was the last thing he needed right now.

For, all this week, his mind had felt as raw as his back, especially after the 'chance' meetings Antares seemed to have with Quirrell more and more as the days went by. He'd forced himself to talk to Snape once about it, and when that hadn't helped much at all, Antares had decided to just tough it out until the end of term, which was blessedly close now. There were only about three weeks left of the summer term, and once the exams were over, Antares knew he could avoid Quirrell easily by just sticking to Slytherin, which he hadn't been able to do up till now. It would be rather a lousy way to spend his last few days of almost-freedom at Hogwarts, but compared to what might happen to him if he remained around that turbaned bastard any longer, it was a lot better.

Blaise returned from the showers soon enough, and they were soon out of the dorm and on the way to breakfast, after dragging Tracey away from some last-minute studying in the common room. It was just as they'd climbed up and out of the staircase and into the entrance hall when trouble struck.

"Hey, Black!"

Antares turned as slowly as he could, trying hard to restrain the ready reserve of rage that had sprung up within him, itching to burst out. Oh, it was *them*. The last three times this had happened, it had been them – them being some Irish brat called Finnegan and some other turd called Thomas, both in his year. Both Gryffindors. Both stupid enough to keep on attacking him with questions about the Forest, despite the increasing strength of the Stinging Hexes Antares regularly turned out in their direction.

Antares didn't restrain the urge to sneer in their direction as they strolled up, malicious smiles on their faces. The first time he'd

snapped and hexed someone, it had been because his back had been driving him mad, and because of how many times he'd caught himself thinking vaguely of a plan to sneak out into the Forest to meet with his inadvertent saviour of a snake. The second time, it had been Anthony Goldstein to cop the hex, and that had mostly been because Antares didn't want people thinking he'd go soft on a sort-of-friend-but-more-sort-of-an-acquaintance.

Now, the third time –

"We just wanted to know –" – it had been Seamus Finnegan, and the way he'd turned up at the Slytherin table had seemed suspect –

"You really are stupid, aren't you?" Antares felt satisfaction run hotly through him as the Thomas boy flinched at his tone. The fourth time, *he'd* been the one to tap Antares on the shoulder and actually smirk at him while asking stupid questions. "Do you really need more of a reminder than last time?" Last time had been the fifth time, and had involved both of their stupid arses. Or, rather, had involved neither of them being able to sit down in Potions a few minutes later.

Antares almost grinned at the thought. Snape had liked that –

"You think you're so tough, hexing people left and right," Finnegan said, his tone becoming nicely angry. "You think no one's going to find out, don't you?"

"Yep," Antares replied, resisting the urge to cross his arms and smirk at the pair of them. "I mean, anyone finding out would first think I was horrible, but then..." He shot Tracey a sly look, and she finished the idea off for him, pretty near perfectly.

"*Then* they'd wonder why you didn't just put up and shut up," she said sweetly, after catching his eye.

"Like good little Gryffindors," Blaise added, not one for being left out when there were nasty comments going around. And it was good that he did, actually – he was the only other person apart from Snape that Antares thought could possibly make Gryffindors sound like slimy, alien and incomparably stupid beings. "Maybe we should all hex them so it sticks."

“But Blaise, that would be like training them,” Tracey said, sounding scandalised. “Wouldn’t want to waste time on that, would we?”

“Not really,” Antares said, flicking out his wand. “I’ll just do the honours, then. *Mordeo!*” But just then, the doors to the Great Hall, previously almost closed, burst open, and Antares bit his lip, thinking suddenly that the Gryffindors’ empty threat might not have been so –

“Ah, Mr. Finnegan – just the person I need to see of a morning.” Snape’s almost painfully sarcastic tone, now normally a relief for Antares to hear in tight straits, sounded almost like a godsend. “That colouring – just as good as tea, the shock. And Thomas, I suppose you have some sort of reason for making such rude faces in my direction...?”

For, having been the first person Antares thought to hit with the Stinging Hex, Dean Thomas was contorting his face in the most awful expressions to keep from crying out. Antares couldn’t help whispering another hex in Finnegan’s direction, just in case – oh, good lord, had Snape noticed?

“Ah, and Finnegan is your accomplice,” Snape said, smiling horribly. “Detention, effective immediately –”

“Mworh!” Finnegan said desperately, the sound somewhere between a squeal and a groan. Antares bit his tongue – wouldn’t do to laugh. Draco was daft like that frequently, and it usually got him into trouble, so –

“Don’t worry, you’ll have some more time to cram before your first exam, as useless as that would be,” Snape said, his advance unstoppable. “This way – if I remember –” – he seized the two boys, each by one arm – “ – Filch had the most important thing –”

It was all Antares could do not to laugh until Finnegan and Thomas had been marched round the corner with Snape. Even then, as he clutched at his sides and leaned precariously on nothing, he could hear some titters around him, from people who had been watching, as well as some grumbles.

“We’ll be late,” Blaise finally said, but weakly, as if all that laughter had drained his voice. Antares nodded, and as he, Blaise and Tracey went into the Hall, he noted with a private grin that some of the other first years gave him wide-eyed looks as they entered.

Now *that* would put an end to most of the questions. For, despite the very pointed example Antares had made of the first few people to ask him rudely, he’d only ever noticed more people eyeing him with a sort of determinedly gossipy gleam to their eyes. Tracey was getting quite good at spotting older years that might have given Antares serious trouble in fending them off – she insisted they had some sort of mental glow about them, but neither Antares nor Blaise had ever seen such a thing – and thinking up ways to avoid them.

Antares sat down with an impatient sort of thump. It was all very well having fun doing it, but lately, it just felt like he was avoiding everyone for some reason – Quirrell, obviously. Snape occasionally, especially when he’d tried to talk to Antares again about the snake thing. Half of first year and the sprinkling of older students that still persisted in thinking there was some kind of mysterious secret to what had happened to him while Draco had been hieing himself off into the Forest, shrieking all the way –

It really didn’t bear thinking about, just now, and after a fervent wish that he could just go *home*, Antares forced himself to stop, concentrating instead on the nice breakfast before them. It worked until Tracey started arguing with Blaise about the location of the last known camp of the High Goblins, after which Antares found himself frantically dredging up every fact of History that he could remember – which wasn’t much. Which was upsetting, so –

“I’ve had enough of this,” Antares said tiredly, not bothering to see if either Blaise or Tracey had heard him. “I think –” – *good, Quirrell still stuffing himself* – “ – I’ll go to the library.” As half-expected, his announcement went unheard or unnoticed, and Antares soon found himself on his way out of the Great Hall, fingers itching for a way to test himself *properly* on the stuff in History of Magic he just knew he needed to know, and had forgotten –

“Hey, look out, will you?”

Antares caught himself just before sounding off a Stinging Hex – it was getting to be a bloody habit, that – and realised who it was. Terry Boot, and looking rather disgruntled. Which wasn't strictly Antares' fault, but...

"Sorry Terry," he mumbled. "Just – bloody History of Magic's got me in such a –"

"Seen the timetable, have you?" Terry said, interrupting almost immediately. "There's Herbology first, before that."

"Oh thank god," Antares sighed, angling so he could fit through the slight crowd talking nervously in front of the doors. "I just know I don't have the bloody Goblin succession down, at least I'll have time to –"

"Speak for yourself," Terry said shortly, interrupting again. "Herbology's a nightmare, for me. That frigging Sprout, she hates me, she's going to make it hard on purpose –"

"At least she answers your questions," Antares said, feeling a little heartened nevertheless. "Everything I say to Binns, it's all 'stop talking, Black', or even 'stop talking, Potter' –"

"So it's true? He actually –"

"Yeah. I mean, they're all dead, you'd think he'd *know*...and anyway, I don't look like a Potter, do I?"

Terry made a sound somewhere between a sigh and a laugh. "Wouldn't know, duh. Like you said, *zip* – all dead. My mum's mad for heraldry and genealogy and stuff like that, but she's never interested in dead people. Extinct lines, she calls them."

Antares sighed. Now if only Bella would just stop talking about their nearly extinct line, she'd probably decide on marrying into one of the ones that were alive and kicking, and fallen into disrepute or whatnot. Although he wasn't quite sure his mother would stand for doing that – she was rather too proud for Antares to even imagine her putting up with someone's low status that way, even if they were madly rich or whatnot. Though that *would* make a difference. Or maybe if Antares somehow managed to get the stupid famous Black

fortune willed to him – whoever had been being choosy before about marrying someone with Bella's past would definitely stop being choosy then.

And then Antares began thinking of how exactly he would manage to get the Black fortune, and the varied and mostly fantastic thoughts and schemes lasted him through his feverish search for Ugorir the Beardless' children and even the rather longer Herbology exam, which mostly consisted of answering inane questions about plants and pruning stuff very carefully.

Antares finished fairly quickly, ignoring the poisonous glance Neville Lupin gave him when he did so – Neville was officially the best at Herbology in their year, and it always seemed to upset him when someone came close to stealing his so-called title, especially now. Antares, bored of sitting still, quietly approached Professor Sprout and asked if he could help with setting up the batch of plants for the second or third years that he gathered would be coming in next, and grinned to himself when she indulgently said yes – mostly at the angry colour on Neville's face.

For the rest of the exam, Antares helped to tease the nameless plants – *well, not really nameless, but I don't know their names yet, right? So it's pretty close* – into the sort of fits of temper he'd never seen a plant get into without some serious intervention. He tried to keep the grin off his face as Neville stomped up to stonily request to do the same thing, but the would-be grin soon faded when he spotted the aggrieved look on Blaise and Tracey's faces by chance.

Great Merlin – that meant a lecture on Antares' Purpose As A Slytherin, if he knew anything. They'd been getting really frequent towards the end of term, despite what he thought was rather nasty behaviour on the hexing front, and though Antares had a feeling that it was to do with those times he sort of kind of went out of his way to help that Abbott girl (really, she was so pathetic at one of the locomotion charms that he'd *had* to help her, if only to stop her setting herself on fire), he had no intention of backing down or doing more than promising vaguely to 'behave better'.

As soon as Sprout had hustled them from the greenhouses, ignoring the groans of a few unlucky people, Antares' friends struck. It started, as always, with Blaise.

"There's no way you can explain that whole thing back there, Antares – don't even try," Blaise said, sounding upset. Antares refrained from pointing out that Blaise might (just *might*) be taking out the frustration of the exam on him – from what he'd seen, it hadn't gone well for Blaise at all – but soon, Antares wished he had. "I mean, it's just moronic, now – Sprout could've gotten on just fine without you stinging those poor vines –"

"They're not poor, they're strong enough to strangle a man," Antares pointed out, his tone just this side of smug. "And she was having trouble with them. Wasn't she, Tracey?"

"I'm not even sure I want to get into this," Tracey muttered. "Blaise, just let it go this time, will you? I need to think about History of –"

"Screw history, Tracey! If we don't break him of this stupid habit now –"

"Actually, if you *do* break me of the 'stupid habit', I won't have any reason to tell you what really happened that night," Antares said almost eagerly, interrupting Blaise mid-rant. His satisfaction grew as Blaise literally stopped talking, and almost stopped walking for a moment, as he quickly realised exactly what night Antares was talking about.

"You mean you're really going to..." Blaise's voice trailed off uncertainly, as well it might. Antares remembered how adamant he'd been about sticking to the bare details of what he felt he could tell Blaise during their sleepy, frightened conversation when Antares had finally gotten back to the dorm. And of course, he'd hexed Goldstein, too acquaintance-y friend or no. Blaise and Tracey had known very well to stay off the subject, especially when Antares had even threatened people who had very cunningly decided to ask them for juicy details instead.

"Well," Antares said thoughtfully, "I might not tell you *now*, but –"



“Oh, you git! You can’t just –”

“Yes he can, Blaise,” Tracey said firmly, pinching him hard enough to stop him mid-sentence. “Shut up.”

Antares quickly fixed on a look of indecision, and that headed off Blaise’s determination to search out the facts, and quite nicely, too. As they entered the castle and trudged wearily into the Great Hall for lunch, Antares couldn’t help thinking that a bit of indecision seemed to work for him very well, and perhaps needed to be applied...a little more often.

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Indecision, Antares had soon decided, after a spate of experiments, was definitely the way to go – especially now. It was the third day of exams, and he’d somehow weathered the more and more determined onslaughts of Blaise’s desire to know about Antares’ ill-fated trip into the Forest with increasing amounts of threats and carefully crafted indecision. Antares could even remember Tracey looking a bit conflicted about her own, subtler part in the questioning, which was outstanding considering Tracey. But now, fidgeting nervously in the clumsily enlarged DADA classroom, Antares instinctively knew that this was the real test.

Quirrell.

Antares, sensing a movement to his right, looked down at his sparsely-covered scroll and dipped his quill again, making as if to write another sentence. He felt an odd pressure on his mind as Quirrell stumbled by, and didn’t feel safe letting out the breath of relief that was gathering in his chest each time the Professor’s almost hungry eyes slipped away from him. Praying fervently that his expression of tortured indecision over the exam (which he’d finished quickly enough, a combination of his desire to leave quickly and the fact that the exam was almost disgracefully easy) continued to pass muster, Antares pretended to write on his scroll of parchment, knowing that Quirrell wouldn’t be able to tell if he really was writing from all the scratching that was going on in the room. It, to put it bluntly, sucked to have to pretend in these careful steps (never ‘writing’ when Quirrell was nearby, and certainly never when he

seemed to be watching closely) all because he'd finished early, but Antares reasoned that he could 'finish' about at the same time as everyone else, and be reasonably safe leaving the class with everyone else, instead of isolating himself by visibly finishing too early or too late, and then having to leave alone. Which would mean Quirrell would follow him, and –

The quill snapped suddenly in his hand, and Antares cursed, his voice sounding too loud in the almost-silence. Several people huffed or gave him disapproving looks, but most of them went on writing and looking over their work as Antares carefully set down his quill and took out his wand, meaning to repair the thing before Quirrell could offer to –

“W-W-Wait a m-moment –”

“*Reparo*,” Antares said, loudly, to make it clear that he wasn't cheating. God, he hoped the spell would take – *oh, thank Merlin* – so Quirrell couldn't try to mend it for him, and cut him in the process, or do something equally nasty. The Gryffindors off to the left were actually looking up from their scrolls, looking scandalised and rather resentful, but their reactions weren't the important ones here. Quirrell looked strangely thoughtful, and didn't even try to interrupt as Antares spoke nervously into the mini lull that had crept up on the class. “I'm sorry, I just wanted to –”

“Spells a-a-are s-strictly f-forbidden during written e-exams, Black,” Quirrell said firmly. “The rules are c-c-clear –”

“It was just a *Reparo*, and there's no way to modify them so that –”

“R-rules are rules, young man,” Quirrell said again. It surely wasn't Antares' imagination that the bastard sounded pleased – oh no, there was an almost greedy look in Quirrell's eyes, made worse by the slight, triumphant smile on his face. Which, in turn, was made worse by the way the Gryffindors smirked over at him, as if – “P-please put d-down that quill –”

Gritting his teeth, Antares did so, wanting to snap the stupid thing again. By the self-satisfied look in Quirrell's eyes, it may not even have snapped because of Antares' inner tension – *oh, you fucking* –

“Y-your ex-xam is s-suspended, Black,” Quirrell said, approaching slowly, the weight on Antares’ mind growing steadily as he did so. “P-please stay b-behind...”

Antares didn’t even look up. Bastard, bastard, *bastard* – he’d been damned either way, he’d had to be. However would he get out of staying behind, now?

Thirty minutes later, Antares still hadn’t answered that question for himself. His head felt close to bursting, and his burns were starting to really hurt, and not only from whatever they were always hurting about, but from the way he was hunched over his desk. It wasn’t like he’d even been caught cheating, which made everything worse – Slytherin’s points were going to get hacked, positively *hacked* for this, and Antares would probably be forced into giving up blood in some ingeniously legal way into the bargain. And then –

He closed his eyes, and took a deep breath, ignoring the sounds of one more person handing their paper in. There just had to be a way out, and he wasn’t going to find it by panicking once he was the last one here.

“Th-thank you,” Quirrell said, sounding tired. Antares wished fervently that his turban was crushing him, strangling the thought out of his fat head – what he wouldn’t *give* for Snape to burst in at this very moment – “Black, y-you may come up.”

Antares restrained the desire, once again, to snap his quill and throw it into Quirrell’s eyes or stab him with the pieces, and drew himself up. His back ached, and it felt like tendrils of fire were pulsing through his burns, but Quirrell didn’t know that, and he wouldn’t, he *wouldn’t* –

“Black,” Quirrell said again, sounding almost annoyed. “I-I caught y-you fair and s-s-square, you kn-know.”

“I didn’t modify the quill,” Antares said, as calmly as he could. “All I cast –”

“Y-you cast a *s-spell*, boy, and it’s n-n-not allowed,” Quirrell said disapprovingly, taking the last two scrolls of parchment from a very

worried-looking Tracey and Blaise without even looking at them. Until – “Y-you may be e-e-excused, you two.”

Antares steadied his shaky nerves with a hard look at his desk, and quickly buried all thoughts of his friends somehow working to distract Quirrell while he escaped under the Cloak. It wasn't even wildly possible even with them in the room and looking fairly ready for anything, as they had been – not with that shrewd look on Quirrell's face. It wasn't *fair* –

“D-did you f-finish at all?” Antares nodded stiffly, trying to ignore how Quirrell had stood up and was making his way over. “L-let me see...”

Antares made no move to hand the scroll to him, staring stonily ahead as Quirrell picked the scroll off his desk, his slow, almost reluctant movements signalling that Antares had been wise not to do so. “Ah...I s-see.” The scroll betook itself over to the overflowing pile on Quirrell's desk and hovered there, not settling down to join the others. “N-now, young man, y-you have a choice.”

Antares gulped.

“A-all I r-require is an evening of y-your t-t-time,” Quirrell went on, hardly seeming to even notice how frozen Antares had gotten at that statement. “Tomorrow evening s-should suffice –”

“No,” Antares said, almost before he could think it through. An exam cancelled – appearances of cheating – both would be horrible on his record, and would probably cost Slytherin points, yes, but to spend a whole, unsupervised evening –

“Come now, boy,” Quirrell said, his tone bewildered. “It is f-for something i-important, and r-really –”

“No.”

Quirrell leaned closer, almost forcing Antares to lean back to glance at his face. “No, boy?” His tone had taken on a hard edge, one that had Antares hoping desperately that the door – “No, you must be j-joking.”

"I didn't cheat," Antares said, simply, trying to keep his voice steady. "You shouldn't be punishing me in the first place, so –"

"A-and who will the Headmaster believe?" Antares froze. The coldness in Quirrell's voice, right now – "A – a m-modified, scrubbed-up, aggressive street urchin, o-or –"

"I said no!" Antares half-shouted, wrenching himself away from the fear that that image called up. God, he could be expelled, *expelled*, it was obvious – just because – just because of *Quirrell* and his fucking –

"Well then," Quirrell said coolly, with a strange smile. "Go."

It felt like waking up from a dream, to hear that single word. But as soon as he'd heard it, Antares immediately knew that he had to, before he broke down, gave in. He seized his bag with an angry, reckless flourish, whipping out his wand and holding it tight enough that he couldn't feel it in his fist as he began to stalk out of the classroom. For a moment, Quirrell was silent – almost as if he was shocked. And then –

"Black, wait –"

The lightest of words, of phrases, it still felt like a command. Antares' body almost turned of its own accord, making him stumble, hard, against a desk and chair that he ran into mid-turn. The shock seemed to clear his head, and this time, he didn't wait for another offer, another suggestion that he could fix this by doing something he just *knew* was dangerous.

Shouldering his bag closely to himself, Antares ran, bursting through the door and slamming it satisfactorily after himself, the rage and fear boiling in him seeming to increase at the thought that it should have been locked, if Quirrell was really serious about getting his attention. That last command –

But Antares laughed, dryly, harshly, heading hard for the nearest staircase that would lead to the dungeons, ignoring the stares of the few people milling around in the corridor. Oh, he could just see it –

Quirrell had thought he'd give in, had thought it so much that he'd just *forgot*.

A taste like bitter gall flooded Antares' mouth as he somehow bit down on his near-hysterical laughter, but he kept on moving, somehow. Snape would fix this. He *had* to.

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"So, been exposed for the cheating scum you are, then?" Neville said. "Now, I can't remember how many points Slytherin lost for that. Ron, can you?"

Antares shut his eyes as hard as possible, trying to force back the angry swirl of magic that kept trying to find its way out. *It'll pass*, he told himself, desperately, tightening his grip on his fork. *Lupin will move on, and this will pass, and you'll be fine* –

"Has anyone given you detention yet?" Weasley said, smirking. Antares wanted to shove a fist into the stupid little arsehole's grinning mouth, see if he continued smirking then – "Maybe they'll let Filch have the honours – let him lose you properly in the Forest this time –"

"Yeah, Black, maybe you can find your way back to wherever you went last time," Neville said, nastily. "Come on, Ron – we don't have time for this lot –"

Blaise gave Antares a warning nudge as the two smirking boys began to move off towards the doors of the Great Hall, but he just couldn't take it. "Yeah, Lupin, I know you *wish* you could cheat on Potions. I guess you know it'd just take Snape looking at you to wet your fucking pants on the scene –"

Neville paled, turning back. "*Excuse me?*"

"You heard me," Antares snarled, satisfaction positively boiling through him as Neville paled even more. "Now fuck off and pretend to study – suppose it's better than remembering you'll fail anyway."

Weasley, red as his hair, stepped forward, his fists already balling up. "You take that –"

“Weasley, leave the talking to your betters – ‘specially since you won’t cheat for him anyway. You know, Lupin, you *might* want to find a more useful sidekick sometime –”

“You –”

“ – but I suppose you’re too busy wanking over catching Snape in the act.” That sent Neville speechless, and even sent a few people tittering nearby. “No, really, Lupin, I believe you – Professor Snape’s doing something *illegal*, and you’re the only one who knows!” The titters grew into laughter, and despite the embarrassed look on Granger’s face as she lingered over by the exit, Antares surged on. “Newsflash, Lupin, you’re not the Auror of Hogwarts, and you’re not a fucking hero today. Take a de-aging potion if that’s really what you need, or just sod off.”

“That will be quite *enough*, Mr. Black,” McGonagall said icily, from behind him. Antares snapped his mouth shut, but didn’t bother looking up or apologising – no point, she was already going to punish him anyway – “You might resent Mr. Lupin’s sacrifice, but I, for one, do not. Ten points from Slytherin, young man, and you’d do well to learn some respect for the dead.”

“Oh, for Voldemort?” Antares’ reply came out on its own, and had not, as he suddenly realised, by the silence around him, remained firmly in his thoughts.

“Fifteen points from Slytherin,” Professor McGonagall said, her tone silencing the whispers that had started going up. “And detention, Black. In my office, after your last exam. Although I’ve a mind to sweep you in there now, if only to beat some sense into that thick head of yours.” By the spate of lowered eyes around him, Antares sensed, through a sort of disbelieving haze, that McGonagall was glaring round at everyone on the Slytherin table. “If I ever hear that sort of joke again among you, there will be consequences. Am I understood, Slytherin?”

“Yes, Professor McGonagall,” rang up and down the table, in mostly irritated tones, and by the time McGonagall had finally stalked off back to the high table, Antares’ shoulders had sunk down in defeat. He just couldn’t seem to do anything right –

“Oh, well done, Black – that’s twenty-five points you just lost us,” Draco snarled. “Ever heard of keeping your mouth shut?”

“Leave him alone,” Blaise said, immediately, but he didn’t sound half as convincing as he had before, while Draco had been rubbing salt into Antares’ wounds earlier on in the common room. Antares didn’t dare look up to see just how much Blaise didn’t want to say anything on his behalf. Or to see Tracey’s face right now, after all the times she’d warned Antares to just ignore everything after he’d come back from Snape’s office in a rage from the bad news.

Instead, Antares continued to eat, woodenly. Right now, the only thing he could bear thinking about was the fact that he wouldn’t have to struggle against the urge to just give up and help Quirrell no matter how distasteful or frightening the task he would be set would turn out to be, seeing as he had detention.

And if that wasn’t cold comfort, Antares honestly didn’t know what was.

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As Antares trudged out of McGonagall’s office, dragging his feet as he went, he supposed that it hadn’t been as bad a detention as he had been expecting, in theory. The worst part had instead been the way McGonagall watched him like a hawk throughout, never seeming to take her eye off him as sorted through scrolls and scrolls with increasingly numb, aching hands – as if he’d steal one, or something. Or perhaps that was just Quirrell’s doing – Antares had a strong hunch that the absolute bastard had probably been playing up his own side of the story, and bringing up Antares’ former ‘thieving urchin’ status up as much as he could afford to, never mind how illegally that knowledge had been gained.

Never mind how Quirrell had set him up in the first place. Never mind how Snape was being so fucking cowardly and hush-hush about whatever he was supposedly doing to combat Quirrell’s godawful behaviour. Never mind how McGonagall watched him out of her office down to the last second, her blue eyes feeling like skewers in his back. Never mind that Antares didn’t feel like going back to Slytherin.



Antares stopped briefly to think, rubbing at his chilly arms through his robes. It was only logical that the last place he'd want to be about now would be the Slytherin common room. And especially not, after some idiot named Oxbridge had run afoul of McGonagall in exams after Antares' stupid mouth had run off with itself at lunch. The fifteen points Oxbridge had lost had had absolutely fucking *nothing* to do with the twenty-five Antares had lost, but catch Slytherins trying to think logically about the fact that they were now third in the House Cup rankings with only three weeks of term to go.

*At any rate, I'm not going back to the common room,* Antares said firmly to himself, picking thoughtfully at a sleeve. He'd do anything not to be in there right now – later on, he could sneak in, and would be just fine sneaking out again before anyone could wake up and see him. It would mean a firm risk of getting caught loitering after curfew again and losing more points, but...

Wait. Didn't he have the Cloak on him...? Antares checked feverishly, moving rapidly into a nearby abandoned classroom, so he wasn't seen by anyone (and certainly not by McGonagall, whose office was distressingly nearby) while pulling the irritating thing out of his – there. Sighing, Antares shook it out of its slightly set folds, wishing that it was at least a little warmer.

Then again, the lightness of it would come useful in the summer, which meant he could go about outside...

Antares whiled away the time, walking about until his legs faltered and keeping up a constant stream of relatively inane questions to ask Bella when he got home, as well as running slowly through the list of spells he'd learnt over the year. It was pointless, yeah, as it was the last day of exams, but what the hell. Wasn't like he had anything to do, and certainly wasn't like he might be treated all right in the library, which was really the only safe-ish place he could think of going now. Nevertheless, what seemed like an hour or so later, Antares found himself lingering foolishly on the second floor, then, when that palled, climbing steadily up to the third, and wondering absently whether he could sneak into the library anyway.

But when he remembered that it was nearby, it didn't take time for him to feel sort of drawn to the famous banned third floor corridor, and didn't take much longer for him to make an excuse to go. And he'd heard enough from Adrian and Charles about the weird noises they'd supposedly heard while listening at the door that Antares even made an excuse to stop and try as well. The door was locked, as usual, but as Antares listened, he could hear nothing of the snuffling, growling sounds Charles had described. Odd, that.

*Maybe the thing in there's asleep, and it can't...*but no. It was surely all right that it was silent. Maybe that was part of the experiment the Headmaster was putting the poor thing through, or something – nothing came to mind immediately, but that didn't matter either, since Antares didn't really know very much about magical experiments in the first place. In fact, the only real evidence Charles had kept repeating in support of his theory was that the door was always locked, as if to keep people from interfering with the progress of the experiment.

Antares, suddenly realising that he was standing around in front of the silent doors and starting to think of maybe taking a look, quickly began to retrace his steps. He was in enough trouble as it was already – no need to practically ensure that he lost even more points by poking around inside the banned corridor.

It was after passing through a stubbornly cold pocket of air that always resided mysteriously around the entrance to the mouldy old trophy room that Antares suddenly heard something, and stilled. God, he had to be overreacting, but – didn't those – were those voices?

Or, even worse, one voice? *Quirrell?*

Antares froze for a moment, then went into a sort of mad frenzy in the next. He retreated back past the trophy room, and, after a look into the armour gallery, decided it would probably do for the best hiding place, with all the soft creaks from the fidgeting suits of armour. Now, if he could just –

*Clang!* Antares bit back a foul curse as he picked himself up off the floor, staring at the stupid shield he'd just disturbed by mistake. Giving Antares – for the Cloak had been half-dragged off him when

he fell – what he could sense might be a scolding look, the suit of armour he'd disturbed began to creak, in a horribly certain way that told Antares that it actually wanted to recover the damned thing itself, giving him away in the process.

Desperate, Antares tried to whisper a warning. “Wait just a –”

“In there!” someone insisted, and suddenly the door Antares had hastily closed was opening. He spun, shooting a locking spell at it out of desperation. It shut the door, but not for long – “Hey, you!”

“*Petrificus Totalus!*” The spell curled off Antares’ tongue quicker than he’d ever imagined, and the little scream of shock just outside as someone’s black-robed body stiffened and fell only increased his desire to get to the bottom of things. He struggled over the fallen body wedging the door open, not bothering to identify it as he darted after the two other people running away. “Stop – *Locomotor Mortis! Locomotor Mortis!*” They dropped with hard thumps onto the stone, despite Antares’ initial hesitation, but it looked less painful than what would have happened to him if he’d used the *Petrificus* on them instead.

He’d do that now, anyway, but still – “*Petrificus Totalus. Petrificus Totalus,*” Antares said, trying hard to ignore the frightened breaths of one of the fallen students – *they’re all students, I think* – as he slowly approached. His instinct to get that done before trying to question them had been right – one of them had been reaching in for their wand, or something similar, from the stiff position of his arm.

“Now, who are – Weasley? *Granger*? What the...” Antares trailed off into shocked silence as he fully absorbed the fact that Granger – rule-mad, proper *Granger* was with them. And he said them, because he had a strong idea who the first person he’d taken down was – “And Lupin. Christ.” It may have been the spell, but Neville Lupin’s eyes were almost unnaturally wide, and followed Antares’ progress with disconcerting amount of anger and shock. But Antares didn’t have time to figure out why, because the last thing he wanted to do was for anyone to find him like this, just as the next to last thing he wanted to do was to release the Gryffindors.

Honestly, after everything he'd said and done today, if he released them, there'd be hell to pay. Instead, Antares painstakingly dragged Neville into the armoury, ignoring the anger in his unnervingly wide eyes, and carefully levitating the other two into the room one by one. On any other day it would have been ridiculously funny to see the Gryffindors lined up side by side on the cold stone floor in such strangely fixed contortions, all with the suits of armour creaking interestedly and sort of shuffling about to get a good look. But today –

Well. Antares just hoped he could sort this out without anything going massively wrong. It was obvious that he'd have to unbind one of them so he could find out what was going on. A quick look at Weasley and Lupin's faces crossed them firmly out, and that left Granger, who, despite her scowl, would probably be the easiest to talk with.

"No funny stuff – I'm faster than you, Granger, and if you hit me with something, I'm not going to be throwing safe little Body-Binds about. *Finite.*" She scrambled predictably for her wand, but Antares was watching her too closely for much to happen. "*Locomotor Mortis – Expelliarmus...*"

But even then, all Granger did was growl and try to seize hold of either Neville or Weasley's wands. Antares sighed, but his wand was already flicking distinctively, and he knew there was no getting round moving her so she couldn't do any harm – "*Locomotor* Granger." It was hard, hard going, getting her struggling body over at a distance far away from the other two, and by the time Antares had done it, sweat was trickling coldly down his back. "Look, fighting this isn't going to do you any good, Granger. Just talk, and maybe –"

"You bully!" she cried, hardly even listening to him as she wriggled uselessly, trying to roll towards the other two. "Let me go!"

"Don't be daft, Granger," Antares said steadily, his eyes now drawn to the silver pile just out of their line of sight. And if that wasn't another incentive *not* to let any of them 'go', Antares would fuck himself with a doxy. "Look, you just startled me, all right? Just tell me what you're all doing up here, and I'll give you your wand back –"

Granger had stopped struggling now, and was staring at Antares with anger in her eyes. "Neville was right – you *are* working for Snape!"

“Oh, not this again,” Antares groaned. “Look, there’s nothing illegal about Snape, all right? I don’t know what gave you the idea –”

But Granger wasn’t listening – “ – and when he steals the stone, it’ll be all your fault!” Antares blinked. He’d once overheard something to that tune from Granger in the library, after the whole business with the Forest, but it had seemed like so much nonsense that he’d just joked about it to Blaise (“*Can’t even make up anything good about Snape, now, can they? Nothing properly evil, anyway –*”) and left it at that. But the way Granger –

“Has he even told you what he’s going to do with it?” Granger went on, her voice surprisingly unyielding. “Bet he’s told you he’ll share all the gold with you, and everything –”

Antares tried not to laugh in bewilderment, but his amusement seeped into his tone all the same. “Gold? What gold? You know, Granger –”

“And he’s doing it all against Dumbledore! He tricked Hagrid into telling him how to put the dog to sleep, Antares –”

Antares’ mouth fell open. “Wait, there’s a dog? What –”

“He had you on guard, didn’t he? Didn’t you hear it fall asleep?”

Suddenly, Antares remembered the eerie quiet behind that door, and doubted that whatever had been behind there was that lucky. But no, this was all nonsense, how could he –

“Did he even tell you what he was going to steal?” Granger was demanding, her voice getting shriller with every word. “It’s the philosopher’s stone, Antares! And you know about him taking it, he’ll just kill you, or –”

“Wait, the what?” Antares said sharply. He sort of remembered something that sounded like it from all the stories Bella told him, but surely – surely it wasn’t real. But, from Granger’s babble and frightened, desperate expression – “You’re telling me a – telling me a Philosopher’s Stone is at *Hogwarts*? First of all, it doesn’t –”

“We told McGonagall about it, Antares!” Antares froze. So that had been – “We told her it was in danger, but she didn’t listen to us!”

Antares’ mouth began to go dry. “Didn’t listen to us” didn’t sound like McGonagall thoroughly putting an end to what sounded like a silly rumour produced by overheated Gryffindor minds – which was exactly the sort of thing she’d do and do firmly. And Granger wasn’t half deluded enough to lie about something like that, either; Antares could see her desperation, and if he exerted himself just a bit, could see the truth of it.

She wasn’t lying, and that stunned him. “Please, Antares, you need to let us go, or we’ll never stop him! Dumbledore isn’t even here – we’re sure Snape led him off or something, it’s so convenient –”

“Shut up and let me think,” Antares snapped, his head hurting with the thought that Snape might – but no, no, *no*. What was he thinking? Wasn’t there someone else, someone far more suited to the sort of conniving behaviour that would involve sending the Headmaster away on purpose? Someone whose late actions had disturbed Antares to the bottom of his very being?

Antares gulped, but the truth was there, right in front of his eyes. That favour – god only knows what Quirrell had intended him to do tonight. Perhaps stand and guard his way through the banned corridor, or maybe even as bait for the monster behind the locked door –

“Antares, *please* –”

“And if I let you go, what’ll you do? Go after him?” Antares knew his tone was harsh, but the mere thought of Quirrell trying for something as valuable as the Stone, if it was real, was so nauseating that he could barely keep it out of his voice. “You three wouldn’t stand a chance in hell against a teacher, much less – much less Snape.” Antares hoped his stumble hadn’t been too obvious – he didn’t know if he was right about Quirrell, definitely, but to suddenly introduce him into the mix would only raise questions he didn’t want to answer. And pretending he thought it was Snape would only make Granger trust him more. “No, none of you’s going anywhere.”

“But how will you –”

“I’ll go to McGonagall,” Antares said automatically, ignoring the look of disbelief on his face. “If I can’t get her to believe me, I’ll try Flitwick – he likes me enough to check, at least.”

“Go to him first,” Granger said, eagerly, despite the looks of dismay in her still-frozen companions’ eyes. “Please be quick –”

But Antares was already heading for the Cloak and stuffing it roughly into his pockets. “I’ll try,” was all he said before pelting out of the room, hoping it sounded suitably brave and trustworthy.

And try he would – just not for the exact same thing.

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The run down to the dungeons seemed to pass by in a flash, he was going that fast. Antares marvelled that he hadn’t broken something or run afoul of Filch as he panted up to Snape’s classroom door – he hadn’t had time to be careful. If what he thought was correct, he would barely have time to get his story out to Professor Snape –

“What is it *now*?” Snape said, eyebrows rising as the door swung open. Antares stepped in jerkily, his hands aching from how hard he’d pounded on the door. “I don’t know where you get the idea that roaming –”

“Quirrell’s after the Stone,” Antares got out, between his wheezes. “Just caught Gryffindors going – going after him, thinking it was –”

“The *Stone*?” Snape seemed to move lightning-fast, darting from his position just in front of the huge teacher’s desk and through the door that led into his office proper. “Where did you catch them?”

“Third floor,” Antares said, only just mustering the energy to follow Snape into his darkened office. “Just – and there – was silence. Behind the door, to that corridor –”

“Completely silent?” Snape demanded, lighting a fire in his hearth with a harsh flick. “I warned them, I warned that old fool –”

“Sir, I’m not sure –”

But Snape wasn't even listening to Antares anymore, his attention all focused on the handful of Floo powder he'd just seized and thrown into the fire. "Minerva's quarters!" he barked, startling Antares as he did so, then suddenly reaching round for him. "Come with me."

There was no argument to make to counter that implacable tone, and Antares found himself being hustled hastily into the hearth as Snape snapped what sounded like a password. The nauseous spinning made him dizzy, and he only just stumbled out of the large fireplace in time enough that Snape didn't land directly on him.

"Minerva! Minerva, come out this minute!" The urgency in Snape's voice as he strode off the hearth, not even bothering to spell off the soot, was highly alarming, especially combined with the fact that Professor McGonagall had just stalked into the room, swathed in a faded tartan nightgown, looking thoroughly put out.

"Severus, I cannot imagine –"

"You certainly can't," Snape shot back, moving forward with a seriously agitated cast to his expression. "The Stone is in danger, Minerva –"

"Oh, you can't be serious –"

"Then where is Albus? Why did he leave, Minerva, at such an inconvenient time?"

McGonagall stared at Professor Snape as if he was mad. "Severus, are you well? There was an owl from the Ministry, as you well remember –"

"How detailed? And how urgent that he would leave the school so immediately?" Snape asked rudely, his expression becoming angrier by the minute. "Can you not see, Minerva? This is not a coincidence! Young Black here just told me he couldn't hear anything from outside the door to the corridor –"

"At this time of night?" McGonagall demanded, suddenly seeming to notice Antares. "Oh, good grief, child! How many points must one –"



“This is not a matter of *points*,” Snape hissed. “Check the mirrors, Minerva – I can feel it, something is very wrong about this sequence of events –”

McGonagall looked unconvinced. “And who would you say was our thief, Severus? As wretchedly as that Lahiri girl fared against Hagrid’s –”

“Lahiri was a student, Minerva – our thief is a teacher,” Snape insisted. “Check, for Merlin’s sake, so we can have some certainty – I know Albus would have transferred the mirrors to you when he left, as little good as that will do us.”

“Fine,” McGonagall said tersely, after a long, strained moment, and a hard stare in both Snape and Antares’ directions. “If you’re wrong –”

“*If*, Minerva. It won’t turn to when by us standing here,” Snape said quietly, but with a hint of steel in his tone. McGonagall huffed, tugging her nightgown tighter about herself as she moved over to a small pile of what Antares first thought was a set of small, slim books, but turned out to be largeish, squared, plainly made hand mirrors, all of them as normal looking as any mirror Antares had ever seen.

McGonagall, with a few flicks of her wand, impatiently moved one of the little side tables by the small, cosy-looking armchairs in the room to a clear space in the centre. She then began to set the mirrors on the suddenly growing table, one by one, and all by hand. Snape, surprisingly, didn’t move a finger to help her – maybe using them was all about who could touch them, or –

“*Incipio Spectatus*,” McGonagall intoned, her wand flashing in a complex gesture Antares barely saw. One by one, the normal, reflecting surface of the mirrors darkened, then began to look like scenes, all of them different. McGonagall gasped as she ran her eyes over them – in most of them, there was little or no activity, but in one – “*Defigo!*”

“I knew it,” Snape said, darkly. Antares shivered at his tone, but more at the greedy look on Professor Quirrell’s face than anything else. For it was unquestionably the slight, nervous features of Quirrell that the middle mirror had just focused on, illuminated starkly by the bright

light in the room of what Antares realised was chess pieces – giant ones.

“You bastard,” McGonagall whispered, seemingly oblivious to everything as she watched Quirrell silently give what was probably an order. Something huge and black passed briefly in front of him, obscuring their view of him, and in the next moment, he was gone, moving out of the focus of whatever monitoring spell was on the room. “Severus –”

“I can’t do it,” Snape said, almost immediately, shocking Antares. It didn’t make sense – wasn’t he the only one Quirrell really seemed to fear? “I can find Albus quicker than you can, Minerva, and besides...” Snape leant closer to her, looking deadly serious, “...I don’t think Quirrell is acting alone.”

“But he wasn’t –”

“Not in that way, Minerva,” Snape said quickly, his tone bitter. “Not in that way.” McGonagall finally looked away from the mirror, which was now being crossed regularly by something hulking and black – probably one of the chess pieces Quirrell was somehow passing through. The look on her face took away the need for any sort of question – it was clear enough that she could simply not understand who might be aiding Professor Quirrell in such an unseen, insidious way. “For some time now, I have been experiencing...sensations, in my Mark.” Antares’ eyes grew wide – surely he couldn’t be telling *McGonagall* about – but no, Snape wasn’t that stupid.

Or was he? “I dismissed them. But tonight, when Black came to me with his tale, I realised they dated from that assault on Gringotts – around when our dear Quirinius suddenly became inseparable from his turban.”

McGonagall gasped, her face paling horribly. “No – no, it can’t –”

“It does seem to fit, doesn’t it?” Snape said quietly, interrupting yet again. “You understand why I cannot take the chance?”

By now, McGonagall was rising to her feet, a grim look on her face. “Perfectly.” Antares looked from her to Snape, trying to stifle the

acute sense of horror at the conversation. Surely Quirrell wasn't – *harbouring* anything. Anyone.

*Besides, Antares thought firmly, the only 'anyone' that could affected Snape's Dark Mark like that is very, very dead. Right?* As Antares looked up at Snape's grim face again, he suddenly didn't feel so sure.

"I will set off immediately," Snape was now saying, drifting purposefully towards the fireplace. I should be able to find Albus and head him off, somehow –"

"What about the boy?" McGonagall asked, after murmuring something that leached the dark scenes from each mirror, turning their surfaces normal again. "I can't leave him here –"

Snape paused for a moment, his dark eyes moving unerringly to Antares' pale face. "Where did you leave Lupin and company, boy?"

"Armoury," Antares said shakily. "On the third floor –"

"Then I suggest you lock him in with them," Snape said immediately, giving McGonagall an urgent glance. "Notify Filius before you go down, Minerva – just in case."

McGonagall nodded curtly, seizing a battered tartan dressing gown from its haphazard position over the back of an armchair. "Be careful, Severus." Professor Snape didn't even answer – just grabbed a handful of Floo powder from a pot near the fireplace and was on his way. The green flames gave the mostly red room a queer glow, but Antares didn't have time to notice it, as Snape was soon gone, and McGonagall was already steering him firmly towards a locked door he'd not noticed before, talking all the while. "I don't know what on earth you were doing out so late, but that can certainly wait. We must be quick, understand?"

Antares nodded stiffly, marvelling at how quickly McGonagall was able to usher him out into the corridor and shut and ward her door, which, from the outside, looked more like part of a stone wall. But the quick way she'd moved through the door was nothing to the pace she set as soon as they were through it – Antares almost had to run to keep up with the professor then. After clambering down some stairs,

they moved through what seemed like a room doused in red, and climbed through some sort of awkwardly placed door. McGonagall paused as soon as they were through, whirling round to shut the door –

Antares' eyes widened. Wasn't that –

“Minerva?” It was a portrait, with only one person in it – “What is –”

“Don't let anyone out,” McGonagall said, interrupting the sleepy words of the lady in the portrait. “I don't know if – time – oh, I might as well bind you myself.” She shot a quelling look at Antares, then whipped off her dressing gown and began to fold and twist it in a very, very odd way that made it appear long and thin and... Antares gulped – he could feel magic spinning tightly about that thing, and it didn't surprise him as much as it would have in any other case, to see that the garment had become a light grey staff, with complicated spirals carved into it in a way that made them look like they went on forever.

McGonagall didn't waste a moment in brandishing the staff, muttering some Latin that Antares could barely make out – words that raised the hair on the back of his neck and made him horribly aware of the cold draft in the passageway somehow gathering about them –

He gasped. The portrait had gone blank, and looked like it was freezing over, but all in a peculiar way that made it seem part of the world. Antares gaped, but didn't gape for long, for the next minute, McGonagall's warm hand had seized him by the shoulder again and was propelling him along.

“We must be quick,” McGonagall said, almost as if to no one, and though the rate at which they were going did not increase, everything seemed to pass by them quicker. With his own eyes, Antares counted fifteen paintings that they passed in one short stretch of corridor, and when they finally reached some stairs and began to whirl down them, he had to stifle his fear, for it was like running up stairs that were just about getting ready to change or move from their current position...only that they were running down, and the stairs seemed to be moving with them –

*“Adaperio!”* McGonagall suddenly cried, and the staircase swung to a horrible, jerking stop before a door Antares realised was the door to the third floor. “Thank Merlin, that didn’t take long...”

They were soon out in the dim corridors, but were going at a much slower pace. Antares felt somehow grateful that the paintings didn’t flash by like they had upstairs – it went a fair way to making a boy sick, thinking of the castle somehow moving so much around them. He really didn’t think he ever wanted to go through something like that a-

“Here we are,” McGonagall said. Confusingly, they were just outside the Charms classroom. That didn’t seem to faze her in the least, as she boldly opened the door Antares was sort of sure should have been locked, and herded him inside without so much as another word. Antares soon realised why they were here as McGonagall opened another door that he’d thought would be locked – the one that led into Flitwick’s cheery, cluttered office, which, though dim, had a small fireplace.

Moments later, McGonagall was crouching before green flames and speaking quickly to a rather sleepy-looking Flitwick, who looked less and less sleepy as she went on. By the time Flitwick’s head winked out of the fireplace, he looked very angry indeed, and McGonagall looked even grimmer.

“The armoury, I believe?” she said absently. “Don’t just stand there; come along.” Antares followed her out of the classroom, his fingers itching to try the door after she closed it again, just to see if it was – “Don’t dawdle, Black. And keep up – we haven’t got time for staring up and down, as you well know.”

That little admission gave Antares the courage to finally speak. “Professor, is Professor Snape going to...” his voice faltered as McGonagall gave him a narrowed look. “I mean, will he –”

“Who did you say you would go to?” she said, cutting him off and rendering him momentarily speechless. “To Weasley and the others, Black – surely you told them something to make them stay put.”

“Erm,” Antares said, a little desperately. “I almost – well –”

"I'll wager that you told them you'd come to me, or Flitwick," McGonagall said calmly, tugging on Antares' shoulder to keep him moving. "Stick to that story."

"Yes, Professor," Antares said, resigning himself to the shock she would probably display at the way he'd left the three Gryffindors body-bound. Unfortunately, the journey to the armoury went by just as quickly as everything else had tonight, and McGonagall hardly seemed to pause, shoving the door open and ushering Antares inside with what felt like a grip of steel – one that turned steelier when she caught sight of the three bodies lying motionless off to the right.

"Professor, I can explain –"

"And I don't have time to hear it," McGonagall snapped, looking as if she wished she had as she stepped briefly into the room. "*Finite Incantatem*. Now all of you stay here – someone will fetch you when this is all over."

"Professor! We –"

"Do not try the door," was all she said, and mostly to Antares. In the next moment, the door had slammed shut and begun to ice over and somehow melt into the wall. Antares stepped back, disorientated by how quickly everything had happened –

And met what felt horribly like the business end of someone's wand.

"You move, and I'll hex you," Neville Lupin's voice came from behind Antares, confirming his fear. "Drop your wand – *now*." Antares did so, pulling it out slowly and wincing as it clattered to the floor. "Ron –"

"Got it," Weasley said, his tone one of sickening satisfaction.

"Neville –"

"I'm just going to ask him some questions, Hermione," Neville said, almost defensively. To Antares' disquiet, she seemed to believe him, and certainly made no further protest as Antares was firmly sat on the floor, well away from his wand, which he quickly realised was nowhere in sight.

"I honestly don't –"

"Shut up! You were gone for thirty minutes, for crying out loud –"

"Oh, you think McGonagall would've believed me, just like that?" Antares said sarcastically, his mind racing. "She bloody well marched me down to Snape's office and everything – only he wasn't there."

"I knew it," Weasley muttered. "Probably gotten the Stone already –"

"I don't think so," Antares said, very truthfully. "McGonagall Flooed Flitwick and told him to seal something up, and then we Flooed back to her rooms, for some reason –"

"What?" Granger said, sounding startled. "But that's in –"

"He doesn't know, Hermione," Neville said, interrupting her. Antares repressed the urge to roll his eyes – he still remembered some of the pictures he'd seen on the way down here. Wasn't like he couldn't go back if he *really* wanted, no matter how secret they thought it was – "Go on, Black."

"She got out some mirrors and checked something – I didn't see what, but she looked really angry," Antares said slowly. "I think it might've been Snape, but I don't know –"

"How'd you get down here so quickly?" Granger said, a little too eagerly. Neville gave her a cautioning look that spoke volumes – wherever McGonagall's rooms had been was obviously important to them. Or they'd been there before, and didn't want...wait.

McGonagall was head of Gryffindor. Perhaps she lived near their house, like Snape did with Slytherin? It would definitely explain the way they were –

"She asked you a question, Black," Weasley said, firmly. "Answer it."

"I don't know," Antares said, a little testily. "Now, would you stop poking me with your wand?"

"What do you mean you don't –"

“Did you even see how she locked the door?” Antares said, interrupting Neville with a sharp, mocking look. “I’ve never seen a door locked that way – have you?”

“But –”

Antares rolled his eyes. “And if someone asked you how she locked it, what would be the first thing you’d say?”

Weasley sighed, grudgingly. Surprisingly, what he said was even sensible – “He’s telling the truth, Neville,” he said, as if the words were choking him.

“And anyway, McGonagall teaches Transfiguration,” Granger said, practically. “Stands to reason she’d know how to get down here quickly, and lock the door that way –”

Neville frowned. “But what if she needs help?” To Antares, who knew just how much help McGonagall might need, if what she and Snape had hinted at in her rooms was true, the question was horribly apt.

Antares sighed. “Well, we’ll be glad she locked the door in a way we don’t know, won’t we?” All of the Gryffindors, who had been exchanging worried looks, now gave him sharp ones. “You know, you can give me my wand back now...”

“What’s to stop you from cursing us again?” Neville demanded, his own wand still firmly poking into Antares’ arm.

“It’s three against one, and I had you surprised the first time,” Antares said shortly, rolling his eyes. “And anyway, I only hexed you because I thought you were going to hex me.”

Neville gave him a hard look, but the sense of that argument got to him quickly enough. A minute later, Antares was handed his wand, and left to help himself off the floor as the Gryffindors huddled over on the right, talking lowly about McGonagall’s chances against Snape. Sighing, Antares went over to the suit of armour that had betrayed him earlier, looking for a place to sit. It looked to be a long wait, and juggling something in a sitting position would keep him at least a little warmer than if he was hanging about on his feet.



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It certainly seemed a long wait, especially when Antares cast another *Tempus* and found that it was nearing midnight. They couldn't hear anything from the corridor outside, probably because of the weird spell McGonagall had put on the door, so all resigned themselves to shivering in the cool armoury and talking over the faint creaking that came from the suits of armour.

Or, at least, the Gryffindors were talking. Antares hadn't bothered trying to join up with them, knowing they'd probably say no or that their conversation would be stilted with him sitting nearby – not that it didn't already seem stilted from where he was sitting. They all kept looking over at him, as if he really cared what they said about their exam results and how well McGonagall would do against 'that slimy git' – that is, Professor Snape. If Antares hadn't known why Snape hadn't gone down to deal with Quirrell in the first place, he would have rebelled against McGonagall's curt advice, just to shake the idiots up. The way they were talking about Snape, you'd think that he'd somehow cast some worldwide spell that told everyone to distrust him but still let him have a good job teaching children and wandering about a castle chock-full of dangerously valuable items that he might steal.

Just as Antares, idly juggling away, was trying to figure out a way to interrupt without seeming like he was in favour of Snape stealing the Stone, the ice on the door cracked loudly and suddenly began to recede, all before their shocked eyes. Antares struggled to his feet, wand firmly in his cold, slightly stiffened fingers as the ice seemed to melt away to nowhere, leaving no traces on the increasingly normal-looking door. When it opened, he had a spell on his lips, just in case

—

"You can lower your wand, Mr. Black – everything is as it should be." Antares heard the Gryffindors sigh in relief, and very much wanted to as the familiar, if weary figure of the Headmaster stepped through the open door. But though he tried, he couldn't think of a reason for Quirrell to disguise himself as Dumbledore if he'd been victorious, and certainly couldn't think of whether Quirrell would have cared to find out where he and the other students were – "Yes, Mr. Lupin?"

“Oh, Professor Dumbledore, what happened to Professor Mc –”

“Professor McGonagall is in the Hospital Wing, Neville, and a bit worse for the wear. However, the Stone is safe, and Hogwarts safe with it, thanks to all of your quick thinking,” Dumbledore said blithely, his eyes moving over all of them and pausing on Antares. “Quirrell was stopped, and –”

“But sir, Professor Snape –”

“Was completely innocent,” Dumbledore said, firmly, his eyes still on Antares. “In fact, he was the one who alerted me to the situation, and ensured that I would be back in time.” The Gryffindors were speechless, looking between themselves with expressions of bewilderment, and Antares quickly feigned a similar expression when Granger looked in his direction.

“Now,” Dumbledore said, beaming tiredly at all of them, “it is late, or rather, early, and you all should be in bed. Come along,” he said stepping out of the door and beckoning to them calmly, “I will at least see you to the staircase.”

Antares kept a somewhat wary eye on Dumbledore the whole way to the stairwell, ignoring the whispers flowing frantically between the other three. His vague suspicion that someone else would take him down to Slytherin was confirmed by the fact that Professor Snape was waiting at the stairwell, looking both windswept and highly irritated to be there. Antares had to stifle a grin at the accusing looks Lupin, Granger and Weasley gave him, and at the look Snape returned in kind.

“Were you feeding them sweets the whole way along, Albus?” Snape complained as they stepped in, pushing Antares none too gently in the direction that would lead down to the dungeons.

“Would you have preferred that they did not know what role you played tonight?” Dumbledore said, his tone somewhat mild in comparison. Snape simply gave the Headmaster an almost too irritated look and prodded Antares into descending before him, without much more than a curt ‘good night’ flung over his shoulder in Dumbledore’s direction.

Antares didn't know how he kept silent all the way down to the second floor, but by then, he could take it no longer.

"Professor –"

"I have had a very long night, and so have you," Snape said, giving him a hard look. "Best that you were –"

"Oh please, if I didn't tell you that –"

"Quirrell would still have experienced defeat, or at least frustration," Snape said, ignoring Antares' exasperation. "One protection on the Stone held, and held him until Minerva could get her scrawny arse into the chamber."

"But what did she –"

"Destroyed it," Snape said, shortly. At Antares' look of confusion, he sighed. "You wouldn't understand, so keep your mouth shut and leave me in peace."

Scowling, Antares did just that. Oh, he'd find out eventually – Snape would have to tell his mother *sometime*, and with the Cloak, he could easily listen.

The problem, really, was only how to wait out the three weeks of term till then.

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*A/N: Sorry about the confusion of this past couple weeks – as you might have noticed, I will still be writing AST, only at a less rigorous schedule. Hope you liked this latest chapter – my plans for another one for this year, as you may (or may not) suspect, changed drastically towards the end. I'm now thinking of sort of seamlessly going from one year to the next in the next chapter, or, failing that, doing a short sort of 4000-word deal and starting the next chapter in Antares' second year.*

*Till the next chapter, then.*

## **Chapter 21: Consanguinity**

The heat of the flames tickled oddly at him, the acrid smell of soot following him out into the living room that was no longer quite as shabby as before. Severus felt somehow shaken to see the changes now, just now, just when his arm was twinging familiarly and the set expression on Minerva's face was still fresh in his memory. Just when that look of soul-stripping greed in Quirrell's eyes was just as fresh.

He really had no time for this – this faffing about, like his mother would have said. As he moved frantically through his shabby house, thundering carelessly up stairs, Severus wondered if Bella was still awake, then berated himself for doing so. Of all the times to be thinking about her, about skin and sex and –

There she was. Bella was in his bed, her tired-looking frame carelessly covered, a whole, almost delicious-looking leg unscreened. Severus forced his eyes towards his wardrobe and the dusty compartments he hadn't opened – "*Ouverte lumino*," – in what felt like years.

"Severus?"

It was really more of a mumble, but he heard it anyway. "I can't stay –"

She ignored him, of course, rustling behind him fascinatingly enough that Severus passed over an important jar twice without reading the label. "What are you doing?"

"Place spell," Severus said tersely, snapping up the jar, hoping his mind would cooperate. Else he had no idea how he would be able to reach Albus in this state –

Bella stumbled out of bed, behind him. "At this time of night?"

"Albus is needed at the school," Severus snapped, his hastily suppressed anger surging to the forefront as he continued to add to his slowly growing haul of jars and little bags and vials. "That old – that old *goat*, falling for that –"

Bella's hand on his neck felt like a brand. "Don't distract me!"

She withdrew abruptly, adjusting that sinful nightgown about her bare shoulders with all the poise of her former station. "Fine."

Severus winced, but he could already hear Bella retreating to the bed, and besides his arms were full – no levitating these ingredients – and he needed to get on, before he lost any more time. He staggered out of his bedroom, down the stairs and into the kitchen before finally giving up his burden and beginning to frantically sort through everything he'd gotten out. Hairs, fingernail clippings, a sock or two –

The sound of sleepy stumbling footsteps on the stairs almost calmed him. Almost. And then Severus rolled up his sleeves carelessly and made the mistake of looking at his left arm, and though the Mark was nowhere near clear, it made his heart shrivel to see its pink, almost healthy colour, as opposed to the dead white he'd grown used to.

"Severus –"

"I can't explain properly," Severus said firmly, setting aside the sock, which was the only thing he thought might really work. "Not – there isn't time."

"There was time for you to treat me like I'd held a wand to your neck," Bella said pointedly, shifting in the doorway behind him.

Severus isolated the sock on the kitchen table, seizing a bit of hair as he did so. Might as well try to enhance its power. Besides, what was he to say to that?

Bella shifted again, moving into the kitchen. "And apparently, time to sort through socks and such oddities as –"

A strand of hair almost broke in Severus' hands. "The Dark Lord may be in Hogwarts." Now, that was silence – nothing on the silence he'd felt within on the way to the trial, his first and hopefully last trial, but it was close. Severus stopped twining the hair around the sock and paused to examine his efforts – close enough to a rune, perhaps? Perhaps not, but he didn't have time.

When he turned around, Bella was still staring. “Severus –”

“I’m not sure. If I was, I wouldn’t be here.” Severus found himself pushing past her rudely, after that, because he could almost feel the Mark on his arm, and she couldn’t, could she? Oh, her skin was marred there, but it was an empty scar, not even close to the living one that chose to wake and direct his actions, so that he didn’t dare interfere with Quirrell just on the off chance that –

“You’re not making sense,” Bella said, her voice shaking slightly as she followed him out into the living room. “Severus, answer me!”

There’s no *time*, Severus told himself, but his body didn’t seem to be paying attention as it swivelled round, as his arms grabbed her, as his lips pressed down desperately onto her opening, questioning ones. His only compromise was to make it as short as he could, and even then –

“Just *tell* me,” Bella insisted.

Even then. “Ward the house,” Severus could only bring himself to say. “If I don’t contact you in five hours, Antares is in the armoury on the third floor.”

“Severus, wait –”

It was probably unnecessarily cruel that he should Apparate away at that precise moment, but Severus had a strong feeling that if he didn’t go then, he would stay a little longer than was necessary – perhaps even longer. Perhaps long enough that he lost the will to search out Albus bloody Dumbledore from whatever aerated hole in the air he was travelling through and make the old, happy-go-lucky bastard get back to Hogwarts and fix things.

London wasn’t any more of a shock than usual, cool night air biting through Severus’ robes and testing his skin with cruel fingers as he stumbled through the room. It took a long moment and a fall to realise where he was. And yet the musty smell of disuse somehow got to him, somehow reminded him of the reek of blood and sweat despite the absolute deadness of the dust that clung everywhere. Blood and

sweat were alive, dust was not. And yet, he could almost see Walder at work with that axe, at that table in the corner.

Severus quickly averted his eyes, though the table was still empty, empty of flesh and blood and bone. He didn't have time, time was the issue. And though this place, this house wasn't the best thing he could think of, he knew from painful experience how near it was to the Ministry without being immediately above or close to the wretched buildings of the place, which was convenient. The last thing he wanted to be caught doing by paranoid Aurors on duty was place magic using Albus' filthy old sock, never mind how correct a purpose drove him now.

Never mind that the Dark Lord –

Severus shook the thought fiercely away and began to spell faint blue lines into the floor. He didn't have the time.

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In the end, it was the placement of the thrice-damned sock that took the longest. Severus moved and shifted and peered and cursed under his breath, and sweated, thinking of Minerva against Quirrell *and* the Dark Lord, and good grief, why on earth was Albus so fucking stupid? Relying on Hagrid's foul monster of a dog; relying on a tarnished old mirror to 'protect' the Stone, against Quirrell, fucking Quirrell, who had evaded them both the whole year long under that goddamned turban and was that placement right?

Good, great, blessed Merlin, it *was*. It worked – all Severus had to do was – thank god, now he could get going; now he could find Albus. Severus poured magic into the lines and runes on the floor, ignoring the bright shimmer as he chanted slowly, holding on to an image of Albus with the grip of a desperate thing. The sock, placed just off-centre of the third rune series, began to glow, and Severus focused on it as clearly as he could, until the glow somehow began to shine inwards, turn in upon itself, and it was moments before Severus could see the faint flicker of a Thestral in flight across a large expanse of farmland, with someone wrapped in rather shiny robes on top.

Ah, Albus.

Severus, mind fixed on the place, the contours of the land, reached out and grasped the sock, before Apparating. It felt like a knife grinding him down, and he stumbled as he reached his destination, but no Albus, no Thestral in sight, and good lord did he hate this process.

For it was time to follow the trail, which was always draining, and doubly so for following Albus, who, despite his distinctive magical signature, never left quite enough of an impression for even a good placing spell to latch onto. Severus was good at these, and had done this successfully before, but not on a night like this. Not when so much was at stake.

Still – that was all moot, wasn't it?

Severus took a deep breath, and, focusing on the sock, which felt unduly heavy in his hand, Apparated again, this time thinking of a shabby farm he hoped he would be able to catch up to Albus at.

He was wrong, of course, but it didn't stop him trying. Another aching jump onto the roof of a barn shook Severus' system, and it was a few minutes before he felt balanced enough to try again. This time, the place spell took, just outside of a noisy pub. Severus' weary eyes examined the sky as he stumbled out of thin air and into the alley opposite the noisy establishment, and were rewarded with a thick black shadow, right size for a Thestral in flight, and with just a hint of glitter as that cloud revealed the moon –

Yes, it was Albus, unquestionably. Severus followed frantically through short, less tiring Apparations, hoping hard that they would soon hit the countryside, and Albus could just – oh, Merlin, was Albus really landing?

It turned out that he was. And then a horribly familiar feeling of weightlessness washed over Severus, and all he could think was *left-right-flick-down-PROTEGO*, which was why he wasn't obliterated or maimed in any way by the massive atmospheric blast Albus had just dispelled. As soon as the ringing in his ears subsided, Severus flicked out a silver arrow, urging it on towards Albus so he'd finally realise who the bloody hell was followi –



“Severus?”

Severus' shoulders sagged at the somewhat bewildered shout, and though he took care advancing on the heaving form of the Thestral, he did not waste time in further precaution.

Besides, they'd lost enough time already. Minerva could be – she could be anything, right now.

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It took far too little time to apprise Albus of the situation; he almost seemed to know what was wrong before Severus said anything. The hard expression his face took on on actually hearing of Quirrell's duplicity would have been alarming in any other situation, but just now, it was almost a comfort – Severus knew Albus, and he knew that look, and knew well that it meant some sort of justice. At the same time, Severus felt the bitter tang of shame on his tongue as they rapidly discussed their options – the shame of depending again, needing again. But he brushed it aside – no time –

“We cannot leave Thoros here,” Albus said firmly, not seeming to hear Severus' protests about the Thestral. “I'll Apparate him myself.”

“But –”

“Severus, go.” Gritting his teeth, Severus did, and not a second after his arrival outside the gates of the castle, he began to shiver. The magical displacement that occurred with the Headmaster's arrival was unnervingly vast, heightened by the fact that he was Side-Apparating the wretched Thestral into the bargain. Severus averted his eyes in useless reflex, but still felt the moment that Dumbledore appeared in front of him, accompanied by his steed.

It felt oddly reassuring, as always, to see the lines of strain in Albus' face, and to notice the measured way he dismounted from the Thestral's heaving, skeletal back. When he finally spoke, it was not to Severus. “Go, Thoros – get Hagrid. Tell him what you can.”

The Thestral drew in an unnervingly long gasp and, flicking its burning eyes in Severus' direction with a sort of hungry curiosity, stamped its foot and was off as soon as the gate opened before them.

Severus almost started in shock – but there, there was Albus, wand aloft, already striding forward with a determined look on his face.

Steeling himself, Severus followed. They'd not quite gotten to discussing what might happen if the Dark Lord triumphed below, but Severus didn't think Albus wanted to talk, let alone think about such a thing. But what puzzled Severus was that the Headmaster's reticence seemed to stem from confidence instead of fear. Surely he wasn't fool enough to rely on just the Mirror of Erised? Of course, Minerva was there, but how would that stop Quirrell, with the Dark Lord on his side...?

“Albus, we need a plan,” Severus began, desperately. “If Minerva fails –”

“I made provisions for that,” Albus said firmly, not missing a beat as they strode quickly up the path towards the castle. “She knows what to do.”

Severus' right eye twitched. “Provisions?”

“If all went to plan –” Albus began, but Severus could already no longer listen.

“If,” he spat, hand reaching automatically for his wand. “If, Headmaster?”

Albus ignored him, blasting open the doors with a flat motion of his wand. Severus pressed down the words, the many words that were begging to be yelled at this man, this – this *fool* who had gone and replaced the thinking, calculating man he'd known the Headmaster to be when it was needed –

Albus paused, slamming the doors to behind them, and the words briefly receded from Severus' grasp.

“I must go alone, of course,” Albus said, simply. Severus did not bother to nod – that had been a given from the beginning. If the Dark Lord– “Go to my office, Severus – find the key to my chambers and go in – the Stone should be in my wardrobe. If it is not –”

But Severus, his mind racing with the new information, could not stop himself from interrupting. “In your wardrobe? But – a displacement spell, or...?”

“Prearranged,” Albus said, already beginning to start for the stairs to the dungeons. “Severus, there is no time –”

“And you thought I used place magic to find you to feed my appetite, I suppose,” Severus snapped, now making for the stairs. “Please kill him.”

Albus' answer was mild, but his eyes were hard. “Of course.”

It was a testament to the completely shrivelled hope in Severus' heart that he knew, immediately, that Dumbledore could only mean Quirrell.

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As always, Albus' room was a mess. This time, of course, Severus had no eyes for the gaudy messes of books and beaded slippers piled here and there – all he could focus on was getting to that monstrous old wooden wardrobe near the centre of the room and searching it inside out.

Minutes later, he was cursing Albus under his breath. *Five* passwords on the binding on the wardrobe doors instead of three. Two suspensions of magic instead of one – folly, folly, because even as Severus broke the strong binding charm that kept the errant Stone sealed to a spot on the hidden side of the smallest door of the wardrobe, he knew that such a protection would not have lasted against the Dark Lord if –

If. Severus stared at the stone in his tired hand. If Minerva was dead, if *Albus* was dead...no. It did not do to go down those familiar lines of thought. It simply did not. Bella would be so disappointed, too –

Severus would hardly be able to fraternise with her if he was busy grovelling before the throne of his new-old master.

Severus closed his eyes, set the Stone back in its place (with a rather more sensible amount of precaution, compared to Albus' wild magical extravagance) and left the cluttered room, but not after also sealing the door with a trace of his own blood. Blood magic had never been very hard for him, and the simple spell Severus used wouldn't waste Albus' time later on when it was time to retrieve the blasted Stone.

Severus continued to mull over the spell he'd used, turning it over in his mind as he shut Albus' door behind him. Rather efficient, really – Albus wouldn't have time to come to him to bleed him to perform the counter-spell, and Albus had always had a way with blood magic too. It wouldn't take him long to break the spell. Of course, it wouldn't take the Dark Lord long either, but Severus...didn't want to think on that. Instead he stretched his fingers, pocketed his wand and began the journey down to the third floor to wait for the victor of the struggle that was no doubt taking place below the school. It was well that he met no one – he could not think what he might have said or done if he had.

But Severus' journey to the third floor occurred in uninterrupted silence, and was, in his opinion, over far too quickly. After the few minutes it took to decide on and place himself at the most prominent staircase on the floor – the one that Albus might like to use if things went well, as well as one that the Dark Lord would be most likely to remember – Severus found himself starting to retreat into a daze. Obviously, the evening's events were beginning to take a toll on him. Place magic, though his forte, was of the sort that inevitably tired the caster, and Severus had performed it non-stop for almost an hour, as well as Apparated back to Hogwarts and re-bound the Stone to Albus' wardrobe after breaking the original binding.

Despite all this, when Severus heard footsteps approaching, he readied his wand and a somewhat weak expression of loyalty at all costs, just in –

But no, that was Albus coming round the corner with Antares and the Gryffindors, chatting to them as if nothing of import had happened. Severus couldn't help but snap at the man as he lowered his wand

and put away the detested mask for a little while longer. Albus answered him cordially, praising him, even, but Severus had no energy left for a proper response. It was time for bed, and to Antares' credit, he didn't have to be told to start for the dungeons.

Unfortunately, that meant he felt entitled to question Severus. "Professor -"

Severus stifled a sigh, and devoted himself to cutting Antares' queries short. There was only so much a man could tolerate on such a night, and soon the foolish boy was well on his way to his dorm (to gossip about everything with the Zabini boy, no doubt), and Severus was left to his own devices.

Well. Not just yet.

Somehow, Severus dragged himself to the Floo in his quarters, and, by some vague means, managed to get hold of some Floo Powder, toss it into the merrily roaring fire (as if nothing had happened, nothing at all) and call out the words that had begun to be a sort of personal refrain to him. "Sp- Spinner's End..."

The fire crackled and whooshed maddeningly, but soon, Bella's worried face was in the flames again.

"Oh, Severus!" she cried. "I've been waiting – what happened – I was so *worried*..." Her voice trailed off as she seemed to look at him, really look at him. "You cannot have been serious about –"

"I was," Severus said firmly, cutting her off. Bella's face paled. "Fortunately –"

"Is Antares –"

"Yes," Severus said impatiently, "yes, he is *fine*." He tried to continue to tell her what had happened that night – soon becoming last night – but the words seemed to die within his throat. Everything, and *she* asked –

"You were the one who told me he was locked in the armoury, Severus," Bella said, her tone tinged with hysteria. "The fucking

armoury – I had no idea what you meant, what you *could* mean, and then you just left –!”

“I understand your concern,” Severus said viciously, but Bella did not let him finish.

“Oh, really? Really? You show up in the middle of the night, wake me up, bite my head off when I ask what’s wrong, and Disapparate to face the Dark Lord with a handful of bloody socks, and you – you *dare* speak to me about concern?” Bella’s voice, which had been rising with each sentence, rose to an actual shout on the last word. Severus bowed his head, trying to conceal the palpable relief that was springing up in him, mingled with shame. He’d thought – “You bastard! You absolute *arsehole* – if you ever do that to me again –”

“I won’t,” Severus said quietly, but of course it wasn’t enough. Bella fumed for a good ten minutes, half-crying at some points as she berated him soundly for not bothering to fully articulate what had been going on, while sternly demanding details and deducing them herself when he was hesitant to supply them. By the time they’d gotten to his brusque dismissal of her son, she’d calmed down somewhat – had certainly calmed down enough to have looked Severus over at some point – and began to strongly advocate his own departure to bed.

“Right,” Severus could only say, rubbing at his tired, slightly aching eyes. “This week won’t be too busy, so I’ll try to contact you –”

“I meant bed *here*,” Bella said, interrupting impatiently. Ignoring his shock, she continued. “You *do* have the password to Floo back into Hogwarts tomorrow morning, don’t you?”

Severus found himself starting to flush. “Perhaps it is not –”

“And we are both early risers – or, at least we should be. What with tonight’s...events, I’ll probably have to wake you myself.” By then, she was already looking away over her shoulder, and very obviously disregarding Severus’ unwilling protests. “See you in a moment, I have to change...”

And she had winked out, and Severus was already stretching for more Floo powder and tiredly beckoning his damp cloak toward him with his wand, because – well. Because.

Severus put the candles and lamps out, and was soon on his way.

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Somehow, the feeling of coming to in Bella's arms made up for how much Severus' thighs and back were aching – he'd done a lot of ducking and hiding the previous night while on the hunt for Albus, most of them skills he hadn't quite put to such extensive use in some time. It felt almost a crime to rise and robe himself and Floo into Hogwarts, especially since Bella was only half-awake, and too busy getting ready for work to give him any sort of proper goodbye.

Still, even without that disappointment, the next few hours were somewhat of a trial, excepting perhaps the sight of Quirrell's inert frame that Severus sought in the Hospital Wing soon after breakfast, his morning class being cancelled. Quirrell's body was laid out roughly on an unused bed – something that made Severus think of the few significant deaths in Hogwart's recent history and wonder whether he'd had the ill luck to be placed in the same bed on which they had been laid.

That aside, Severus soon found himself checking whether Quirrell was really dead, discreetly, just in case. *Best to be careful*, he thought, voicelessly casting a *Revivo*, but he knew very well that the wild relief within him upon viewing the spell's failure had nothing to do with caution. He'd spoken to Albus this morning over a late, semi-private breakfast, and Albus had as good as told him that the Dark Lord was still alive *somewhere*, but Severus could not bring himself to see anything but Quirrell's pale, stiffened form and think that this would somehow be the end of it. He was only able to tear himself away from the dead man's side upon hearing Poppy start her usual fluttering over Minerva's awakening.

"...now don't you move a muscle, Minerva," she was saying, giving Severus no more than the usual stern, cautionary look as he walked up to the foot of Minerva's bed. "Your body is very weak at the moment, and still adjusting to –"

Minerva's eyes, though lidded and tired-looking, seemed to gain focus when she caught sight of Severus. "Poppy? 'S that Sev'rus?"

Poppy pursed her lips, reaching out to shoo Severus away from her patient's side. "Now, Minerva, no talking! Your vocal chords took a lot of strain last night, and it's best not to –"

"Sev'rus? Wher'you goin'?"

"He is leaving you to rest," Poppy snapped irritably, giving Severus a sharp look. "Now, Minerva, sit *back* – all those potions and poultices won't do any good if you keep shifting them about, you know!"

But Minerva paid Poppy's angry words no attention. She shifted restlessly under the blanket, struggling to get comfortable, and it pained Severus to see how restricted and slow her movements were. "Sev'rus wait...I – I saw –"

"No need for that," Severus said briskly, cutting her off. "How do you feel?"

Minerva paused for a moment, and then laughed hoarsely. Even as Severus noted the rasp that he was now sure underlay everything she said, he tried not to cringe at the bitterness evident in that laugh, and, though he only stiffened and continued to question her, he also noted the way her eyes roved slowly about the room, a clear question in them that was all too familiar. *Am I safe?* they demanded. *Who is here – is this a trick?*

It made Severus feel sick, with a mixture of fear and anger he'd often felt during the worst days of the Dark Lord's ascendancy. As Poppy told them both off emphatically and finally managed to hustle him out, he couldn't stop running that slow, deliberate sweep through his mind – that was how Minerva had checked rooms then, when she was on duty. Never really missed anything – had always joked about having the eyesight of a cat. Not with Severus, of course.

It was nearly all Severus could do to stumble down, all the way down, to his dungeons, even with the sheer amount of students that gave way or bolted upon his approach. Once he was within his rooms, he somehow got his hands on a cauldron and headed straight for his



personal supply cabinet. *Aloe*, his mind suggested, unhelpfully, as he remembered the rasp in Minerva's voice, the way her limbs looked and moved as if they'd been stretched somehow.

Severus gritted his teeth, frustration melding tightly to the rage and fear within him. *Aloe* indeed. Was there *aloe* for the look in her eyes? For the feeling in his heart?

Reaching for the stirring rod, he didn't even try to answer that. There was, simply put, no point.

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The rest of the term plodded by, irrespective of the way Severus' desire to be home and away from Hogwarts seemed to double each passing day. He snapped at everyone in sight, and barely managed to say a cordial word to Minerva on delivering her tincture of *aloe* apart from instructions on how to ingest it. She took it without complaint, which added to the helpless anger within Severus – he knew that sort of pain, that sort that forced you to choose between resignation and madness.

Minerva, though, despite Severus' misgivings and Poppy's near-constant irritation at having her orders to stay silent and still disobeyed, was strengthening daily and had already begun to crow about Gryffindor's imminent success as the winners of the House Cup. Apart from their disgustingly smug victory over Ravenclaw in the last match of the season, Albus had further advanced their cause by making a very silly public speech at lunch on the day of the end-of-term feast and giving each of the Gryffindors fifty points each. Of course, he'd also given the same amount to Antares, but obviously as some sort of conciliatory prize. It, however, was a godsend in its own peculiar way, hearing Minerva mutter things about jealous people who couldn't stand to lose just one House Cup when they had won many, and it meant that Severus wasn't nearly as irritated by the loss as he should have been.

In any case, Severus was more than ready to return to Bella and his own bloody bed and no stupid Slytherin students trying to weasel out answers to their questions about the mysterious happenings on That Night. In fact, he was ready enough that he anticipated the beginning

of the mad rush that always took place on the morning of the Hogwarts Express' final departure of the term with a relatively sane rush of his own, which became mad once he remembered that he'd forgotten to brew the batch of contraceptive potion that would be needed for the summer holidays.

All night, Severus brewed batches of the fairly complex mixture, which Bella took religiously, and which he didn't feel was quite safe to brew in his own house, considering Antares' presence over the summer. The process was irritating in the usual manner despite Severus' normal precautions, and by the next morning, he was approaching a now quite familiar threshold of arousal and wondering whether it would cloud his judgement on his arrival at Spinner's End.

Correction, on his and Antares' arrival at Spinner's End. Severus rolled his eyes as he began to decant the potion into phials with slightly shaking hands, partly because Antares was the reason he wasn't brewing this slowly in the comfort of his own home and partly because Antares, as Bella had said at the beginning of everything, was the reason he needed to brew it at all. It was the sort of irony that these situations seemed to attract, and by the time he'd finished decanting, Severus discovered a very real need to check his Silencing wards before collapsing with laughter.

Somehow, Severus managed to get a hold of himself well in time to finish his packing, and was consequently in fine form within Slytherin that morning.

"Is that your trunk, Kendall?" Severus demanded, for what seemed like the hundredth time. The nervous third year's eyes widened – *ah, still red? Bloody Pucey, smuggling alcohol in again* – and she began to stumble towards the ramshackle article, stuttering all the way.

"Well y-y-yes, Profe- "

"Shut up," Severus sighed, directing a long-lasting reinforcing charm in her trunk's direction. "Try to brew your own hangover potion next time, for Merlin's sake. And those eyes better be clear by the time you're on the Express..." He paused, looking around for a moment. The common room was fairly chaotic but not overwhelming, as the older years and smarter students had already clearly labelled their

trunks for collection and were on their way up to the Entrance Hall. That made it easy to spot Antares and his cronies chatting excitedly over something near a group of trunks – something that looked remarkably like the list of the first years' exam results.

Severus smirked – he clearly remembered that two of the Slytherins had made it into the top ten overall, something he would relish repeating again to Flitwick, who believed his own house had some sort of moral right to eight places in the top ten. This time, only five Ravenclaws had made it in, having been beaten to the top by that odious Granger girl. And even then, Antares and Draco had captured the sixth and seventh spots, and the rest of the spots went to one of the hapless Ravenclaws and three of the Hufflepuffs, all of whom had done outstandingly in History of Magic which was regarded as a bit of a nothing subject by the Ravenclaws in general.

Of course, that would be poor comfort to Flitwick that the differences in that score had kept some more of his students out of the top ten, but that didn't matter. It would only make mentioning the results that much sweeter, especially since the Ravenclaw second years and fourth years hadn't done all that well in the all-round rankings either –

“Oh! Sorry sir –” His pleasant ruminations were cut short at that moment by someone bumping into him from the back – someone, luckily, that he'd been wanting to speak with, at length. “– didn't see you, so –”

“You'll be lucky if that's the least of your problems this morning, Pucey,” Severus snapped. “Where's the other little leech – ah, Warrington, there you are. I hope I don't have to explain why the two of you will be doing double duty in the dungeons at the start of next term –”

Warrington looked horrified, even more so than Pucey, who looked faintly guilty. “But sir, I didn't –”

“Unfortunately, since I have found you in every respect to be like those disgusting Weasley twins – something of which I am deeply ashamed – I have decided to treat the two of you as one. Henceforth, if one of you loses points, the other shall as well, and if one of you is punished...” Severus let his voice trail off, finding from the horror on

each boy's face to be of just the severity he desired. "I see that I have made myself clear. Do enjoy your summer." Severus walked away with something of a spring in his step. It was partly the thought of finally succeeding in shocking those two, but even more the thought that *he* would be enjoying his own summer.

However, when Severus found himself starting to hum tunelessly as he cut through the crowd of students that was spilling out onto the lawn, he put a stop to it. There was no need to become giddy.

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Later on, Severus would find his estimation of that to be in the wrong. The ride to London on the Express was as disgustingly noisy and busy as always happened when riding with the general student body, but what made up for it was the fact that he was on it at all, and even looking forward to the days that stretched in front of him this summer. Severus read, stretched, and amused himself by appearing in places he was not wanted, and so was in a good mood by the time the train pulled into King's Cross, even after being nattered at by Sylvie Sinistra about her oh-so-exciting upcoming summer trip to the island of Hydra. Severus disembarked immediately, and, together with Sylvie, went about imposing some sort of order on the chaos that usually occurred when the Express reached its destination.

Then all was dust and bother and idiot students being unable to spot their idiot parents even after being pointed twice in the right direction. Severus, who was planning to Apparate home to Spinner's End after everything was settled (or at least relatively so), did not look for Bella or Antares. And yet –

"Mum!" Antares' squeal was not particularly loud or particularly different from that of the other students, but somehow Severus' eyes were drawn to the boy anyway. Perhaps because –

"There you are," Bella said, laughing as Antares stumbled over something to get to her. Severus decided to allow himself to be distracted just this once – she looked nothing like herself, as always, especially if you didn't count her bearing, or her mannerisms, or the way she absently scanned the platform as if looking for threats, or

even the way she seized hold of Antares as if she never wanted to let him out of her sight again. "Where's your trunk, Antares?"

Severus only just stopped himself from going over to help, and tried not to watch or listen too closely or too obviously as Antares blundered around for his trunk and finally found it. Then it was inevitable that he talk to Bella, because she was leading Antares in this direction, and why had he thought to place himself near the Floo platforms? It could only mean that –

"Ah! Professor Snape, is it?" Bella looked perfectly composed, saying that. It almost hurt, if he didn't look into her eyes and see the small mischief and more substantial worry in them.

"Of course," he said rudely, because anyone listening would –

"Delighted to meet you," Bella said, seizing hold of his entirely too willing hands and pumping it up and down. "I don't know if you remember me – I'm Antares' mother."

"I see," Severus said, and it did hurt, to have to extract his hand from hers and sneer at her. "Your son did quite well this year."

"That's the first I'm hearing of it, Antares," Bella said, giving the fidgeting boy a stern look. "Oh – sometimes I think he never boasts half as much as he should."

"We'll try to cure him of that, Mrs. Black," Severus said, his tone coldly polite. "If you'll excuse me –"

"Of course," Bella said, her look of embarrassment interestingly realistic. "Come on, dear."

It was nearly all Severus could do not to follow them, and his thankless task of continuing to organise those students that were left on the platform seemed even worse after that. But, not ten minutes after Bella and Antares had finally gained the use of one of the Floos (he hadn't been able to not look for that) Severus' hand began to tingle. He checked it surreptitiously as soon as he could, and chided himself for his beating heart and excited anticipation.

*Home safe. When on earth are you coming?*

Severus sighed, and, after a quick good-bye to Sylvie and a rapid check for his miniaturised luggage in his pockets, Apparated home.

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The living room was messy, overflowing with giggling mannequins and fabric, and Antares was nowhere to be seen. Which was why Severus headed straight for Bella's busy form and – "Severus...!" – coerced her into a kiss.

"I really hope you won't be this unwise all summer," Bella said tartly, but she was blushing encouragingly, and her arms seemed loathe to let him go. "We'll speak tonight, of course, but –"

"But what?" Severus whispered, a little distracted by her half-hearted struggle to be free of his embrace. "Surely we can –"

"It won't be possible," Bella said, dashing his hopes. "We can't count on him being distracted every night –"

Severus smirked. "You were planning on having me every night? How flattering."

"Shut up," Bella muttered darkly, but he could tell she didn't mean it, as she followed it up with a quick kiss. "Now let go – Antares'll be down in a minute."

Reluctantly, Severus did so. It did not help his hopes that Antares was down in the requisite minute, chattering incessantly and commandeering his mother at once so they could make dinner together 'like we used to'. Bella smiled, being easily convinced, and was away with nary a look over her shoulder in the direction of Severus' crestfallen face. Sighing, he began to make his way upstairs to stow away his trunk – he certainly couldn't neglect that just because he was annoyed at the situation, especially since temporarily shrunken objects had a nasty habit of returning to their full size at odd times if the caster of the spell was irritated enough, as he was.

Severus' mood didn't improve as he entered his room and began the process of resizing and unpacking his trunk, surrounded as he was by reminders of Bella's inhabitancy. The bed was long since cold, and everything was relatively neat, but the room smelled like her, and that was more than enough to set Severus' mind to fashioning plans to get them together without Antares noticing. He only felt a little ashamed of himself when he played with the idea of drugging the odious boy instead of dismissing it outright, and soon abandoned the unsatisfying process of levitating things into his wardrobe in favour of tramping down to the kitchen to turn up something to eat.

Though unexpected, it was incredibly heartening to meet Bella heaving up the stairs with an already sleepy Antares in tow. "I'm surprised myself," she murmured, in reply to Severus' inquisitive look. "I think it was the train journey."

"Make sure you lock his door," Severus couldn't resist saying as he opened it for her to stagger through. Bella merely rolled her eyes, opting instead to shake Antares into some small alertness so he could undress himself. "I'll be in the kitchen, if you need me. Or should I say when?"

"Oh, begone," Bella replied crossly, and Severus took it to heart. The kitchen was surprisingly clean – Bella's influence, perhaps? In any case, it made it easy for Severus to discover a pot of something mashed and horrid-looking, but fairly delicious. He'd just settled in to eat a plate of the odd-looking meal when Bella appeared once more.

"Don't tell me what this is, please," Severus said, as she opened her mouth to say something. "I think I'm hungry enough that I don't care."

Bella shrugged, sliding into a seat opposite him. "Your fault," she said practically. "If you'd been down here while we were making it..."

"I suppose I should have been," Severus replied, his tone careful. Bella gave him an oddly piercing look, then sighed – *what was that about?* "If you really wanted me to be down here –"

"For dinner?" she interrupted. "That's not – well...not what I wanted to talk about."

“Don’t you think it would be better to talk this over in bed?” Severus asked, his tone direct. It was surprisingly hard to keep from blushing as he did so, but the small, crafty smile on Bella’s face was more than worth the effort.

“I’d rather not tempt myself any further, thank you,” she said shortly, directing that smile down at the table. “But really, Severus, you never finished telling me what happened that night.” With those words, the tension between them increased, changing to something darker. “I know...I know you don’t want to think about it, but –”

“It isn’t exactly that,” Severus said quietly, but he knew it was. And from the look Bella gave him, she did too. “Quirrell is dead.”

“Yes.” *But...?* she seemed to add, with a look.

Severus set down his cutlery, wondering how on earth his fingers remained steady. “The Dark Lord...escaped.” Bella said nothing. She didn’t need to – the look on her face was enough.

“So – so he is still –”

“Alive? Barely, but –”

“But still alive, as you said,” Bella said impatiently, her fingers picking violently at the table. “You should just have said that, instead of –”

“But it’s important,” Severus insisted. “He –”

“It’s only important that we know how to kill him,” Bella snapped. “I didn’t know he could – didn’t know how, even, how he could survive something like that.”

“Join the club,” Severus sneered. “Do you think I knew? Even Albus only guessed, and half-heartedly, at that.”

Bella bit her lip. “Wh-where is he? Now, I mean...?”

“Certainly no longer on the British Isles,” Severus said wearily, scratching at his neck. “If so, Albus would be able to hunt him down. I’d probably be by his side.”



Bella drew in a sharp breath. "You'd risk that?" When Severus made no answer, she dragged a shaking hand through her hair. "*Why?*" From the dread in her eyes, she already knew, but it bore saying anyway.

"Being on the spot would be...expected."

"By both of them?" she said slowly, her tone filled with horror. "But – that's monstrous."

It was hard to say the next few words, but Severus managed it. "Bella, I was – I am a spy. A traitor. Is that not monstrous in itself?" She seemed to deflate at that, and, abandoning her nervous tics entirely, she stretched out and claimed his hand, which Severus abruptly realised was shaking, again. "You know he will find a way to return. When that happens –"

"If," Bella insisted, squeezing his hand. It was useless, really, but it made Severus feel that much better.

"If that happens," he continued, "you and Antares will need a safer place to live."

"I'm no fool, Severus, I know that," Bella whispered. "I – I'll start looking." Then Severus abandoned his seat and crossed to hers, because she had begun to cry, silently, almost angrily. It was some time before she spoke again, and when she did, her voice was toneless and bleak. "Will – Dumbledore will need help."

Severus nodded. "I think he'll angle for yours when the time comes, but I'm not sure –"

"He'll have it," she said quietly, and Severus knew not to bother trying to dissuade her then. "I'm sorry we can't –"

"It's fine," Severus said tiredly, rising to his feet. Bella echoed his action slowly and slipped an arm about his waist, then gave him a hard, uncompromising kiss that made his body begin to protest that it was not fine at *all*. "We – I should go."

But Bella was not yet ready to let him go. "Tomorrow night," she whispered into his neck. "I'll manage it, I swear."

*I can wait till tomorrow.* "Till then, then." Another kiss ensued, and then they began the journey upstairs, separating slowly as they neared Antares room. It ended with a farewell kiss in front of Severus' door – and how it rankled that they could not go in together – and then Bella was tiptoeing into the room she ostensibly shared with Antares, leaving Severus to a cold bed and warm room that smelt too much like her for real rest to be on the cards for him tonight.

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*A/N: Never thought I'd bloody FINISH this, I'll tell you that. I was starting to dread looking at the file at all – the words just weren't coming, and I felt bad. Somehow, after a healthy infusion of doing other stuff, I got ready to write this weekend, and it's all just coming back. I think I'll try to start some notes for the next story (I'm doing separate stories for each year, you see) after finishing off this one, you know – try and hold on to the inspiration as long as I can...but till then, onward, onward to the Intermission, and goodbye for now. Oh, and apologies for the weird divider - somehow, the usual one isn't working in the editor today.*

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## **Intermission 1: Survival**

Minerva still had the dreams. It was maddening – a taunt to her healed nerves and body. The sensation of sweat on her skin each morning seemed to carry a sibilant whisper, insidious enough that she often worried (irrationally, she knew. Spells weren't made for this) that he'd left something on her to drive her mad. Something adaptable, that would change with her and dance by her side, just out of the corner of her eye – something she would always be looking for, and fearing though it remained unseen.

It was a rather romantic notion, and she hated it with every fibre of her being. Minerva knew she was given to those, oh yes. Not many people knew *that*, but she'd always held that it was wise to know oneself, so one could know what mistakes to watch for. And, straightening her bun with an impatient tug, Minerva knew that she'd watched well, taking care to let her notions flower freely – but privately, where people could not use them to hurt her.

But the problem with that was that it gave no barrier to her darker thoughts. Minerva remembered how long she'd made do without them, out of necessity, just to function and still think to use eyes and hands and wand when all had seen and taken part in horrors. Somehow, she had forgotten to do it before wading down into the murk to put a stop to something, an effort she'd known might kill her.

Well, she was paying. Oh, to erase the first sight of Hagrid's mutilated dog from her memory! And oh, to forget that moment of fear, fear, fear, when she'd finally realised just whose presence she'd been following, just whose presence she would be up against. Minerva shuddered now, uncontrollably, and tried not to begrudge herself the need. Why couldn't she shudder, when she'd faced Voldemort more times than she dared remember?

For, more than anyone, she knew why Albus had been so determined, so relentless, during the war. She knew why sometimes, when he seriously faltered, an almost mad look had passed across his face. For once she'd seen Riddle transformed, once she'd seen the red, waxy death etched into his features on his second-to-last return to Hogwarts, she'd felt some hope for the wizarding world's survival die

away in her, to join that which had been falling by the wayside once she'd become a teacher.

Thing was, he'd had so much – so much *potential*. To see that staggering potential so profoundly channelled into the means and ways of destruction had been frightening. To fight against it had been even worse.

For Minerva had never faltered against Tom, despite her fear. And what was left of Tom, now – no, then imposed upon Quirrell like some useless shadow, had remembered. Quirrell had screamed as his mind was subverted, subsumed, and for a brief moment, Minerva had thought he was dying...only to feel, and remember, and wonder that she had even dared to come here after hearing Severus' frightened suggestion.

Minerva grimaced to think of her scorn, despite the fact that she knew they had all been deceived, that Albus, *Albus* had been deceived. She could simply not imagine herself boldly cleansing that corridor now, not even see or feel the memory of the tight lines her face had set into as she'd moved Hagrid's pet (only a gift to their struggle, and so useless in the end) aside and stepped into the gaping trapdoor.

She could only sympathise with how her outrage and how her determination had slowly dwindled to fear on discovering the traces of Tom's magic waving languidly on the regenerated components of her own protective gift. By the time she'd faced Quirrell's doomed frame, Minerva had only fear behind her insubstantial-feeling staff, and that had been before the fight had begun.

Minerva smiled, in shame. It had not really been a fight, to tell the truth. She'd reacted from the first moment, and had gone on reacting until they'd battled their way into the final chamber. As soon as she'd realised that, she'd abandoned self-defence and destroyed the mirror, knowing the Stone would be safe if she did.

And then...

Minerva closed her eyes. And then, indeed.

Tom had...been angry. Severus had visited her least, but his presence had counted most – he, at least, knew what she'd gone through. Had some idea of the sheer, staggering amount of pain Tom Riddle could cause a body. Severus hadn't bothered to say much, or even to express sympathy. All he'd done was ask a few short questions and send up a tincture that had worked what felt like wonders, and after that, he'd never really spoken about it again.

Minerva sighed again – she'd expected that, but still. She always hoped, all the same. Sometimes it did some good, and sometimes it did not – witness to that were the Tom Riddles of the world. Of course, to balance them, there were the Severus Snapes.

And, as Minerva was increasingly beginning to think, the Antares Blacks. Minerva pursed her lips now, remembering that she'd never asked *what* the boy had been doing out and about at that late hour. Even now, she felt no real inclination to, easy as it was to puzzle out a number of possible excuses for Black's wayward behaviour.

Especially not when it had saved them all. For Minerva had no illusions as to whether the Mirror of Erised, the final and most powerful protection on the Stone, would have lasted the night under assault from Quirrell, bound as he'd been to Tom. Oh no, Tom would have begun trying to decipher the message across the top, or would even have driven Quirrell to find and constrain someone else to look into the mirror for them – Tom would have found a way, under all their noses, and then –

But really, what was the use of all this?

Minerva sighed again. That was, indeed, the question. Was there any point in worrying on about Tom and wherever he'd gone? There was no safe way to scry for him, of course – so that just left them, all of them, to keep an eye out.

Biting her lip, Minerva finally stood, carefully, a bitter smile on her face. Nothing new, that.

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*A/N: And that's it for this year, folks. A tad dramatic, yes, but hey, I had fun overall. Did you?*

*Please to be visiting my LJ for more info on the next story's title, as well as other things I'm planning to do before I start work on second year. Otherwise, see you soon, and hope you enjoyed it all!*

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